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MARGARET OF CORTONA

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From the design for a mosaic by Gino Severini.

Behind the figure of the saint the little rocky town climbs up the hill at the foot of which is the cottage where Margaret was born. Above the cottage is a medieval door through which according to legend the saint returned a penitent to her own town. The Crucifix, the one before which Margaret prayed, is still in existence in the church of St. Francis. The grass, the corn, the olive symbolise the richness of the countryside that brought forth a saint, and the dog is the messenger of God that led the saint to where her first Divine Revelation was received.

FRANÇOIS MAURIAU

TRANSLATED BY BARBARA WALL

MARGARET
of
CORTONA

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PREFACE

Margaret of Cortona, who has now become so dear to me, did not force herself upon my notice. I did not want to write the life of any saint—and certainly not hers, for I knew nothing whatever about it. In fact I did not want to write at all. There was darkness over the face of the earth. Was it '41, or '42, or '43? The demarcations of time had ceased : those winters loom in the mind as one black and icy continuum. We were living at Malagar, at the heart of a monotonous horror. There was a German in every room. An enemy accordion whined in the kitchen. The sun might shine, or the rain stream down the window-panes, but the countryside was always in despair.

All the same, one had to write. One could not live on the atmosphere of that time, nor on the calumnies of a press beside itself with rage. What had I done to these colleagues of mine? A Jesuit father at Lyons alleged that it was I who had lost the war and that the reading of my novels had undermined the fighting spirit of the youth of France. In M. Henry Bordeaux's *Les Murs Sont Bons* literature was an easy scapegoat, if I may say so.

Write, yes; but what? The publisher of my *Life of Jesus*, who remained loyal to me in spite of the discredit into which I had then fallen, hoped that I would write the life of a saint. I yielded to his friendly insistence. But then I had to decide which one to choose, and the greatest saints have served so often.

Margaret of Cortona appealed to me because she is very little known in France. I knew that in her youth she had at first fallen victim to the most human of all loves, and that she

had even had a child . . . ('She is just the person for you!') What finally decided me was that all the essentials of her life are contained in the single book written by her confessor; and the most learned scholar can hardly add anything to them.

Moreover, the conditions of the time made travel and library research impossible. (I should not have done this in any case, even if there had been no Occupation and no war.) I found myself, therefore, dispensed from any obligation to depict the historical *milieu* in which the life of our saint was steeped, and compelled instead to do what I wanted—which was to keep narrowly to the story of a soul. As the external events of this life amount to almost nothing, my book has become a sort of meditation on the mystical states, in which I have allowed myself to be swayed, alternately, by the attraction or the irritation they inspire.

I have also given expression, particularly in the last chapters, to the moments of despair through which we were passing at that time. Margaret of Cortona lifted me out of this abominable world. I followed this poor child as far as it pleased her to lead me: I understood her love, I entered into her folly. I heard what she had heard, and from that I collected everything essential, in spite of the distortions of her confessor and of others who have since touched up his book. But I was also annoyed with myself from time to time for writing something so devoid of actuality. The martyrdom of the girl from Cortona distracted me from the martyrdom of my country, and made me unfaithful to my blood-soaked fatherland. I feel that the fitful commentary of my heart and mind on this forgotten saint of the thirteenth century gives this book an accent all its own. You must remember, in reading it, that such and such a chapter was interrupted because it was the hour for *Les Français parlent aux Français*, or because heavy boots were shaking the ceiling, or because

P R E F A C E

the trumpets of the German H.Q. were announcing a Reich victory on the radio.

Later I came back to Paris to find shelter and contribute to the clandestine press. But those dark days before the Resistance, in a countryside drenched with rain or wasted with sun, where I suffered a boredom beyond anything I had known at any other moment of my life—those days are incarnated for me in this little mad saint, intent on destroying her beautiful face which, after years of savage penance, still frightened the Friars of Cortona.

Perhaps it will frighten, or even horrify, some of my readers, for Margaret is not a saint for the men of our time, straying as they do so far from the light. A saint for our time . . . now and again I try to imagine such a being arising all at once and making Christ live again in the heart of mankind—a mankind blinded by blood, hounded from all its lairs, even from the materialist prison in which it has sheltered for nearly two centuries, and grown spiritually enslaved. Will he be a labourer, a Jocist, a priest of the *banlieu*? He will be a humble man, in any case, through whom Grace will break out for all to see in a flood of power and glory. 'This generation asks for a sign,' yes, and from so deep an abyss and with so desperate an urgency that the hour must surely be at hand in which the Love in Whom we have believed will be made manifest.

PARIS,

9th February, 1945.

F.M.

Too Young and Too Pretty

ONE DAY IN THE YEAR 1273 a woman, dressed in mourning and holding a little boy by the hand, knocked at the door of the Franciscan convent of the Celle, one mile from Cortona. She must have been walking a long time before arriving at this wild gorge cut in Mount Sant-Egidio, where the torrent almost splashes the cells of the Friars Minor.

The porter was touched when he saw this exhausted woman, whose hair was perhaps still fastened with gold chains and pearls. He hurried off to find the guardian. The unknown woman was not begging for alms, but for the penitent's habit. Tears of repentance gave her eyes an added grace which did not escape the Brother Guardian, in spite of his brief glance quickly averted; for he sent her away with the gentle phrase (which was to weigh heavily on Margaret's destiny): "My daughter, you are too young and too pretty."

Too pretty! It was probably on the road which led from there to Cortona that Margaret began to hate her too-lovely body. That body was already her enemy on account of the sins in which it had involved her; and now her very beauty forbade her entry into the sanctuary, her very appearance put saintly people to flight. Margaret was to learn how to crush and eradicate this impure loveliness which had stood between her desire and her God. Meanwhile the little boy was whimpering and asking questions. "Shall we soon be there? I'm thirsty. My feet are hurting." But Margaret did

not hear; she was not interested; she was already entirely centred on her new, her eternal love.

Margaret pressed on. She did not know where she was going, but was confident that God was leading her where He intended. And as she went, and as her hatred for her body increased, there arose also in her heart a terror lest she might never achieve salvation—especially after the rebuff encountered at the Celle. This terror was to end only with her life, in spite of the signal graces with which she was to be filled—graces which were soon to overwhelm her.

She entered Cortona by the Berarda gate. Two women, who were passing, stopped. The elder was called Marinaria Moscari; the younger was her daughter-in-law, Renaria; they hesitated for a moment before speaking to the unknown woman. But, having the habit of charity, they had no doubt learned to detect imposture, and from the first glance they saw that here was a distress which could not be acted. Perhaps they, too, were moved by the charm of her face, bathed in tears. Two Friars Minor had fled before so formidable a beauty, but the Moscari women had not the same cause to be afraid; and is there anyone, on the further side of the Alps, who is not in love with a beautiful face?

Margaret replied to them with an unreserved confidence, but in the street she only said enough to pique the curiosity of the holy women and stimulate their hunger for souls. For they felt the need to lay a friendly hand on all who passed within their reach, and it was especially Marinaria who seems to have been so possessed. The confession was resumed and reached its end in some room in the Moscari family's house, and the effect of it was such that the women did not allow either the child or the mother to pursue their journey.

The Delightful and Cruel Ways of the World

OF MARGARET'S EARLY LIFE at Laviano—an Umbrian village situated not far from Lake Trasimene in the fever-stricken valley of Chiana—we know almost nothing. She was born there in 1247. Her father was probably a tenant of the municipality of Perugia; he was only a poor farm-labourer. Margaret was seven when her mother, who had given her a taste for prayer, died. Two years later her father married again and from the first there was war between the child and the new wife.

Adolescents who are derided in the home become dangerously susceptible to the love they inspire outside. Margaret's dominion began from the moment she crossed the threshold of the house where she knew she was hated, and where her very beauty, far from winning her affection, only made her stepmother more jealous.

She knew the intoxication of those first conquests which reassure us as we emerge from a humiliated childhood. So we are not such a monster after all, however much they make fun of us at home! Margaret became aware of her attractions and her power. She was a peasant girl, and yet she had a fascination for noblemen. She even captivated the most important of them all—this gentleman of Montepulciano who may have been lord of Laviano and master of the Villa Palazzi.

All the biographies of the saint are at pains to make out that this young man was a seducer who flattered the young girl with presents, deceived her with promises of marriage,

and kept her almost by force for nine years. And this although the first biographer of the saint, her confessor, Friar Giunta Bevegnati, shows us a triumphant Margaret "in the richest of clothes, her hair decorated with golden chains, going out only on horseback or in her carriage, her face made up, proud of her lover's wealth."

Was she married? All the evidence seems to show that she was not, and on this point Bevegnati's testimony is explicit. In what character, then, did she reign for nine years at the castle of Montepulciano? Wadding (in the *Annals of the Friars Minor*, vol. V.) suggests that she had intrigues. This alone we know for certain: that she lived in sin, "in crime and dishonour . . ." She committed evil and did so in the presence of Him who had already chosen her, marked her with His sign. That is what Margaret's story teaches us—that a creature can be already chosen, while she is still in the deepest misery of sin. This is not guess-work. We know little about her sinful life, but what little we do know comes from an infallible source. After a certain point in her life, Christ was in communion with her, and most of the incidents of that early period are only known to us because Our Lord recalled them to her—to His "poor daughter," His "little poor one," as He called her.

Otherwise we might never have known that on the night of her abduction, when she and her lover had to travel the twelve miles to Montepulciano, they nearly perished in the swamps of the Chiana valley. But Our Lord Himself spoke to her about it: "Remember, my poor child, the crossing of that pool in the middle of the night, when the ancient Enemy wanted to drown you and your accomplice in the very moment when you were preparing, by your crimes, to renew the agony of my Passion; but my divine clemency watched over you, and you were delivered by a mercy which knows no bounds."

These private messages which mystics say they hear never reach us in their total purity. Almost always they seem to us to strike a false note, to miss the accent which the Evangelists have led us to expect from Christ's own words. Private messages, even in the greatest souls, have to force their way through an impoverished nature still penetrated by average human passions. There is a book called *Divine Words* in which Father Saudreau has collected the interior messages of holy people throughout the Christian centuries. We have only to read it to see how far human stupidity is sometimes mixed up with those messages. Sometimes, indeed, the sheer silliness of their idiom almost completely obscures the authentic word of Our Lord.

Nevertheless, what was said to two Italian sinners of the thirteenth century—Angela of Foligno and our own Margaret of Cortona—has a tone all its own, as if their human loves had cleared away the obstacles which sometimes encumber blameless lives. Here there is nothing but the ash, the burnt rock, and the adorable voice crying in a wilderness where all vegetation has been devoured by fire.

Human genius alone (on the rare occasions when it has heard and written down the words of Christ) knows how to catch the divine stream, unalloyed, at its source. I am thinking of the *Mystère de Jésus* of Pascal which Father Saudreau has refrained from including in his compilation. Pascal was a layman, caught up in the trammels of the world, professing a suspect theology, and shot through with imperfections. Perhaps this is why his words have escaped the distortions of censorship.

The same cannot be said of the messages of Margaret of Cortona, which have been carefully sifted by her confessor. The Abbé Brémond speaks somewhere "of the fatal transformation that the words of a mystic can suffer when they are edited by a prejudiced Director." Very often the voice

of Margaret is smothered by the voice of the good Friar Giunta Bevegnati; the one voice interferes with the other, obscuring its message with the bric-à-brac of human interpretations. (And this not to mention all the mistakes of compilation, transcription, and translation.) We must, therefore, make allowance for the commentator and try to capture the message that Margaret herself heard, heart to heart with her God—with that God of whom we can say nothing which does not sound false, but who sometimes allows us to speak with Him, and whose word we are able to hear when He addresses Himself, not to us who are unworthy, but to those whom He has chosen above the rest.

The Chosen Sinner

CHOSEN ABOVE THE REST . . . At Montepulciano, Margaret, the sinner, was already chosen. Everything follows from that choice, made while she was still in sin. Her years of crucifixion were already germinating in those nine years of forbidden delights. Never for a moment did sin, her sin, divert the loving attention of Him who had chosen and cherished her from all eternity. "Remember that while you were still enjoying yourself in the world and leading a life of darkness, vice and sin, I made myself your master and your guide and inspired in you a true compassion for the poor and afflicted. I made you taste the joys of solitude so that you cried out in an access of devotion: 'Oh! how good it would be to taste the delights of prayer in this place! Oh! how well could the praises of God be sung here! With what security, what peace, could one pass one's days in penance here!' Remember that, although darkness enveloped your soul, you lamented your fall, and you said to those who greeted you that if they knew your shameful life they would no longer greet you and would no longer even want to speak to you."

Little Thérèse of Lisieux told her Sisters, on the eve of her death, of the earthly glory that was going to crown her sanctity. She knew that she had conquered the world as well as heaven. This certainty seems the more surprising when we find it in a lost woman like the sinner of Montepulciano. "What will become of you, proud Margaret?" her envious

friends often asked her, and they predicted for her an ignominious old age. But the kept woman, far from being abashed, defied them; "There will come a time when you will call me Saint, because I want to become one, and you will make pilgrimages to my tomb with the staff and purse of pilgrims."

That glorious destiny, disclosed—as if from the top of the Cross—by the little martyred Carmelite as she consummated her sufferings on her hard and narrow bed, was also seen by Margaret from the depths of her disgrace. Margaret, with a lover and a little boy, the fruit of her sin, mysteriously found the assurance to glorify herself in the same vision.

Sinners are convinced that there exists no possible communication between the Creator and His contaminated creature; that because Grace is lost, the love of God is also lost. They do not realise that God and the soul confront each other without interruption. If anything, sin adds an element of drama to this confrontation because it accentuates our difference from other people, and recommends us with a special plea to the love of the Redeemer. It almost seems as if, when we set our face against God in a certain way, we are unconsciously seeking a way to force ourselves upon Him.

Margaret was to atone for the pleasures that delighted her and this she already knew. But she had to pass through sinful moments before she could arrive at her time of reparation. Her life was thus to model and compose itself on a pattern held up to humanity thirteen centuries earlier; the pattern of the penitent woman with the unbraided hair and a vase filled with precious ointment.

The fact that God is always there, whatever we do, does not diminish the gravity of our misdeeds. It should rather put us on our guard against the temptation to ignore the indestructible divine presence within us on the grounds that

Grace is lost. What Christian has not been coward enough to feel, in his sinful moments, that elation of "Anyway, *He* is no longer there! You can go ahead with a light heart!" But *He* is always there, and Margaret, at Montepulciano, knew that sin does not remove this eternal Witness from our side.

Her life was shameful and in spite of its disgrace *He*, who was always watching her, reminded her of it. All the "remembers" that Christ untiringly repeated to her made it impossible for her to lose sight of the obstinate presence of God—even in the citadel of her shame. He was as present in that life, sinful though it was, as *He* can be absent from a similar life when it is pharisaical.

For Margaret there was nothing left but Faith. "I had lost honour," she was to write after her conversion, "dignity, peace, all, except the Faith." She awaited the blow, not knowing where it would strike. We cannot doubt that Margaret was a much loved woman because it was through her lover that she was struck. She had perhaps thought that the struggle concerned her alone, and that on the day of vengeance she alone would be the victim. But the man who was separating her from God had been closely watched for nine years; at a turning-point of his life the invisible Rival lay in wait for him.

MARGARET OF CORTONA

young madcap suddenly attacked and murdered in the corruption of his adolescence.

Margaret went away without looking back, returned to the Villa, doffed her jewels, and took her child by the hand.

The Fig Tree of Nathanael

SHE FOLLOWED THE CONQUEROR, she gave herself to the stronger Love. But first she must go back to the place whence she had fled at the moment of her sin. She must go back to her father's house in Laviano; she must go back in spite of the unimaginable torment awaiting her—her stepmother's triumphant hatred and the scorn that would be meted out to her hour by hour. But something that she had not foreseen happened. The old woman ignored the protests of the feeble and cowardly father and declared that she would leave the house if the scandalous girl put her foot inside it. And she shut the door in Margaret's face.

Thus the young woman avoided the worst ordeal that she had imagined. She did not have to measure her courage against the torture she had steeled herself to face. Instead, she found herself alone with her little boy in the garden where she had been as an unhappy child, beset with temptations. It was here that, like another Margaret, she had gazed secretly on the jewels that an Umbrian Faust had given her. He had crept round the walls, perhaps he had scaled them. He who now possessed her demanded a last victory over the murdered rival, who still lived in her heart when she thought of him.

It was from this garden she had run that evening, from here that she had embarked on a vessel in which she would surely have perished if the invisible God had not kept watch at the prow. But even when she had escaped from the

phantoms of her past love, there revived within her heart all that hatred of the stepmother who had insulted her, banished her from her father's house, and thrown her into the darkness.

Only yesterday, at Montepulciano, the world had been at her feet. And now, although her lover was murdered, surely she could still be queen? She was only twenty-six years old, and knew the power of her radiant beauty. She had done all she could. Was she to blame if her father cast her out?

Not knowing what to do, Margaret sat down under the fig-tree in the garden, and we are reminded of Our Lord's mysterious words to Nathanael: "Before Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig-tree, I saw thee" (John i. 48). Jesus also saw the little innocent Margaret playing in the shade of the tree, at a moment when she foresaw nothing of her present disgrace and future glory; and later He saw her as she watched anxiously for her lover, or perhaps re-read his note, her cheeks burning at every word. And now He saw her yet again as she sat trembling. But she had already chosen; she gave herself, surrendered herself entirely—though a voice whispered within her: "Go back to your pleasures, you are beautiful, you will always have lovers to protect you when your parents turn you out."

But Margaret had been won over by other joys. "Remember, my *poveretta*," Our Lord was to say to her later, "how you went back to Laviano, to your father, after the tragic death of your accomplice, bathed in tears, crushed, shattered with grief, your face ravaged, dressed in mourning . . . Remember how cruelly your father received you at your stepmother's instigation. Not knowing where to go, with no one to advise or help you, you sat under the fig-tree in the garden and humbly besought me to be henceforth your master, father, husband, and lord. Then the old serpent, seizing this opportunity, tried to persuade you that

your beautiful body, your fresh youth, and this humiliating rebuff, were sufficient reason to throw you back into sin; and he suggested to you that wherever you went you would find accomplices and adorers. But I, the renewer of all inward beauty, was moved by the beauty you had so recently profaned, and I inspired you to go to Cortona and submit yourself to my Friars Minor."

She rose, left the garden behind her for ever, and, always dragging her little boy by the hand, took the road to Cortona. The inner beauty which her God so loved was to shine out in all its splendour only when the other fatal beauty which had lured her into sin had been eradicated. She was already determined on its eradication. Indeed that is almost the whole theme of this story—a woman's fight to the death against her weak flesh—and it horrifies our reason. Margaret the sinner saw nothing beyond her sin and her love, nothing beyond the demands of her love. She blighted her own beauty, became her own torturer, to comply with the demands of a crucified God. It defies reason, and yet the risk of seeming insane never bothered her. She did what she knew to be true, and for her that truth was overwhelmingly clear; she must abase the sensuous body that had separated her from her Lord—her Lord who was crowned with thorns, His hands and feet pierced, His side opened. What was more, she knew that she must get to work at once, at that very moment; and she hurried along the road to Cortona, dragging her exhausted child of sin by the hand. Already that child was destined for the same altar as Isaac.

On this particular point Margaret was to be a scandal to the world and, perhaps, to us. (But Christ was a scandal too, and His Cross would still be a stumbling-block if we saw it in its abject reality; not as golden, shining and triumphant

but as little, low and spattered with blood.) Margaret possessed nothing of her own except the thorn in her flesh—the consciousness of what she had done in her pleasure-seeking and guilty youth; nothing except the memories of what she could not undo, and the choking anguish that memory caused her; nothing but God who was there and could heal her.

Landmarks in Margaret's Life

THE MOSCARI WELCOMED THIS MARY MAGDALEN and her child into their home and introduced her to Friar Rinaldo of Castiglione, warden of Arezzo, upon which the convent of Cortona was dependent. The penitent was confided to the care of Friar Giunta Bevegnati.

But all this was not to happen without great difficulties. The face which had put to flight the porter and the guardian at the Celle also terrified the Friars Minor of Cortona. Although from the first Margaret had declared a systematic war on her body—her penances already dismayed the town—the Friars refused to believe that such a beautiful person would persevere, or remain outside the world for long. And the fact that she starved herself, lacerated herself with whip and hair-shirt, and said to her body: "You conquered me, I shall conquer you!" did not allay their distrust.

Friar Giunta Bevegnati admits that he made her wait several years for the joy of wearing the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis. This delay only increased the frenzy of destruction which Margaret unleashed against herself, since her beauty was its cause; yet the worst maltreatment could not destroy her beauty altogether. She shaved her head, dressed in rags and smeared her face with soot, and still the Friars postponed her reception into the Third Order. Thus disfigured, she still seemed dangerous. If they had waited longer, what might she not have inflicted on her poor body?

But even after she had received the habit from the hands of Friar Rinaldo of Castiglione (probably in 1276) she did nothing to curb this holy hatred—certain aspects of which make one shudder—though it had already made her ill, indeed almost an invalid.

Clothed in the habit she so ardently desired, Margaret embarked on another stage, no less cruel than the first. From now onwards her life was one cry of love, a gasp between two ecstasies, because her Lord and her God spoke to her almost every day, and the whole of Cortona waited on this flaming dialogue.

All this time Margaret had lived with her protectors, the Moscardi, and, so as not to be a burden on them, she had nursed women in childbirth and taken their babies to be baptised. In 1277 she obtained a more private cell from the Moscardi, outside but not far from their house, perhaps on the very spot where the monastery *Delle Poverelle* has since been built. One day, in that year, as she was praying before a little crucifix venerated in the church of the Friars Minor and now in the church of St. Margaret at Cortona, she heard Our Lord for the first time. "What do you want, my poor little one?" (*paupercula*). Margaret answered at once: "I ask for nothing; I want only You."

Friar Giunta has not given us the facts of Margaret's life in chronological order, nor has he specified a single date (though he always makes a note of a saint's day!), and sometimes he records the same episode several times. But we will try, at this point, to indicate certain landmarks.

From 1277 to 1286 Margaret seems to have given her services to the poor instead of to women in confinement. She gave with whatever strength she had not expended on her penances. She founded a hospital in the house of a rich friend called Diabella which became, in 1286, the hospital of

St. Mary of Mercy. Friar Giunta tells us that Margaret gave all her goods and belongings to this foundation without keeping anything for herself. But the death of her lover must have left her without resources; and had she not already given everything to the poor?

A confraternity of men and women joined her, all of whom probably adhered to the rule of the Third Order. They helped the prisoners, too, whom the town would have left to die of hunger if these faithful people had not succoured them. The confraternity drew up its statutes on the 4th of November, 1286, in the church of St. Andrew, presided over by a prior. He was attended by six rectors and six advisers who remained in charge for six months and appointed their successors. Margaret's companions were called 'the poor ones.'

Margaret died in 1297 in her last cell on Mount Sant-Egidio which was shown to her in a dream at the foot of the citadel: she knew God intended her to be there, but there were bitter disputes about it with those to whom she owed obedience.

We should like to be able to classify the mystical experiences, and the events, of this life which Friar Giunta has passed on to us in such a haphazard way. The great temptation is to group them according to the laws laid down by contemplatives. Thus we should see Margaret advancing gradually from the purgative life to contemplation, and thence to spiritual marriage. And it is true that from God's side a steady increase of graces is apparent in His relation with the saint. Thus the first words that Christ addresses to her would mark the end of the purgative stage; she would enter the contemplative life with the ecstasy she had when Our Lord called her His daughter. Finally her last years show her, in spite of appalling ordeals, to be as lost in God

as a living creature can be. It would seem that she attained the ineffable union direct, without passing through the 'intellectual vision' described by St. Teresa.

But if we make a close study of Friar Giunta's story we see that a strict classification of the episodes he records would only be arbitrary. From the first day Margaret's surrender was absolute, and her whole life consists of the movements of her love around the Crucified, of a hatred for herself pushed to madness, of the ever-recurring agony of the fear that she would never be forgiven. On the road from the Celle to Cortona she had already touched an unsurpassable degree of love; as against this, never to her dying day did her Master allow her soul, racked with love and fear, to be possessed by lasting calm. Thus, although we are tempted to reproach Friar Giunta with the haphazard character of his story, perhaps it gives a more faithful account of this holy life than one, written from the outside, which ordered its events according to the established rules of the mystical ascent.

Friar Giunta's indifference to chronology is not surprising in the record of a life lost in God. Contemplation destroys the illusion of time. Margaret lived in the eternal moment of the Presence that ravished her. Nor would it further our knowledge of her to know what was happening in the outside world. That would add nothing to our subject, but merely make us a Guelph or a Ghibelline, a partisan of Genoa against Venice, or of Florence against Siena. Margaret, like all mystics at all times, was a contemporary of Christ.

No matter at what point in history a contemplative may live, his life is always the same: he is always face to face with his God. The Creator always makes the same demands; the enraptured creature always loves and strives. Margaret's

dialogues with Christ, the heights and depths of her love, would have been the same a century earlier or a century later. From century to century, beyond the colloquy between creature and Creator, there is always the same murmur of human unrest, the same dismal destruction aroused by the same passions.

Ishmael, or the Child Martyr

WHEN WE HAVE DONE A VERY BASE THING for which we feel most deeply ashamed, the time invariably comes when we want to do it a second time. The return to the vomit is a law of nature—so shameful that we prefer not to think about it. But a Christian in the early stages of grace should certainly beware of this temptation, for sooner or later he will be assailed by it.

The great mystics are free from these humiliating recurrences of desire. True sanctity never wants to repeat an evil, for it is endlessly expiating it. Even when she was still a sinner, walking along the road to Cortona, Margaret felt this absolute horror of her sins—a horror which never weakened its hold upon her until the day she died.

And yet there was a part of her detested youth which thrust itself upon her; a heritage that she could not throw off or really prevent herself from loving: there was this boy, this little male creature, who had perhaps the look, the gestures, even the laugh of the murdered lover. As if she was the prey to an hallucination, Margaret saw the father in the son. It was her sin that snuggled up to her, put its arms round her neck. She must have often pushed the bewildered child violently away and made him cry. How could he understand this sudden transformation of his charming and adored mother into a beggar-woman who seemed to hate him?

For it is certain that, even while she was looking after

him, she hated him. This little entity existed and drew breath precisely in so far as she had mortally offended her God. And this God had said, challenging the wisdom and rational morality of men: "Do not think that I am come to bring peace on the earth. I come not to bring peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be those of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me."

No need for her to look further. Yet this child of her sin was so weak and defenceless! She could not bring herself to leave him; and so she dragged him with her in her penance. As Agar had taken the little Ishmael, she took him fiercely into the desert and condemned him to share her thirst.

He followed her in the street as she went begging for her poor. But they were less poor than he, and he was jealous. Nothing was too good for them. She prepared fat foods and fish for them with her own hands. But to him she said: "My son, when you take possession of the cell which you will henceforth inhabit, you will eat in silence the raw food that is your lot. It is not fitting that I should spend on preparing it the time which should be devoted to the praises of God."

She had distributed all her household utensils to the poor and possessed only odds and ends. When even these had gone she begged feverishly for more things to give away—linen, clothes, wood, blankets, knives, pots and pans. She went so far as to unsew the sleeves of her clothes, she gave away her veil, her rosary, her holy-water stoup, her bedstead. But the child had nothing. He never partook of the humble meals she prepared for her poor. Friar Giunta calmly writes; "She could not have cared for him less if she had not been his mother."

All this would be intolerable if it were prompted by

hardness of heart; but she fought against her heart with all her power. "If you renounce yourself and your son, I will call you My sister,"—that was what Our Lord seemed to say to her one day. Her little child was so bound to her that she could not renounce herself without renouncing him too. We are tempted to say that that injunction was too hard to be listened to. But there are two aspects of Christ's teaching which the saints simultaneously adore; the part which consoles their natural feelings and the part which makes them kick against the pricks.

We do not really understand belief. When Abraham acquiesced in the sacrifice of his son and bound his hands, he touched an extremity of faith that horrifies us. And yet in those moments before the Angel appeared and stayed his hand, he believed that His God was a God of love and consolation. In the same way Margaret never doubted that her child was the object of a double love in spite of the hardships he had to undergo. She believed that he was loved first as a man (for there is no man that Christ has not loved unto death) and secondly as the son of a chosen woman; a woman whom Our Lord had torn away from guilty pleasures so that He could become her unique Delight.

Margaret's heart and mind did not recoil from the words: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." She knew that it was Love Incarnate who preached those words, and therefore they did not disturb her.

No, this hatred desired by God bears no resemblance to the natural hatreds which gnaw at our sad lives. God will take care of all the people He asks us to leave; indeed they may even benefit more by being left than by being loved selfishly. We have no idea how much we may owe to someone who has renounced us for Christ's sake. This aspect of

the human drama is ignored by novelists and dramatists. When a woman resists love or, having succumbed, rallies, and renounces it, perhaps she saves her accomplice for all eternity. But he, of course, thinks he has been betrayed.

And did the poor child think himself betrayed? Although he was young, Margaret had told him as much about his life as he could understand. Undoubtedly she had introduced him to the mystery of the Cross and she had probably said like Christ to the son of Zebedee: "You shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of." Very often a child understands the things that he will no longer understand when he is grown-up. There is something akin to genius which strikes us with so many boys, something which disappears with puberty; and this has its counterpart in sanctity. The simple expression "holy childhood" conceals strange depths.

Margaret's boy did not resist the persuasions of this mother who was possessed by God. Even if she had not been so visibly inundated with Grace, he would nevertheless have believed what she said. Remember: our mother was always right, she could do no wrong. She had no need to be a saint in order to share the divine infallibility.

The Temptation of Obloquy

SO ISHMAEL HELD BACK HIS TEARS and followed his mother into the land of thirst and hunger. He was destined to be a child-martyr with his heart's full consent. But we are free to question whether this was in fact the will of God. It is possible that Margaret was wrong. Hagiography exalts the saints, as if they were no longer human. The fact is that in so far as they are lovers, in so far as they are literally mad with love, they are, like everyone else, prone to strange and terrible errors. If Margaret was wrong about her son, it was not in spite of her love for Christ but because of it.

Lacordaire says that there are not two kinds of love. He maintains that love, the cause of so much sin, retains its disruptive power even when centred on God instead of a creature. And Jacques Rivière observed in one of his notebooks written in captivity; "No other religion has interposed love between the creature and his God—love with its monstrous upheavals, its extravagant logic, all the turmoil that it lets loose in the soul." Even when it is possessed by the love of God, nature remains frail and blind. Margaret, thirsting for humiliation, was drawn to a sacrifice more absolute than any other she could make; a sacrifice that, far from winning the world's praise, would earn its scorn and disgust.

For there is no doubt that in all this Margaret was swayed by the desire for obloquy. She, who would have gladly le

herself be struck and spat upon by the soldiers of the pretorium, could not endure to be thought a saint already. By rejecting her son, she immediately cut the figure of a bad mother—and there is nothing the world forgives less easily in a woman.

Margaret obviously revelled in the horror she aroused; that is apparent from Friar Giunta's embarrassed commentary. He tells us of a calumny that was current in Cortona: "It was said that the child whom she had abandoned and left in utter misery was overcome with grief and threw himself into a well at Arezzo." All that was needed to give some show of truth to this invention was the fact that the child had not come to Cortona since the Christmas festivities, and that for some time they had vainly looked for him in the schools of Arezzo.

In that year, on the feast of St. John the Evangelist, the child's teacher went in to Margaret's oratory where she was praying after communion. He brought her news of the child and at the same time asked to be paid for his work. Now Our Lord had forbidden Margaret to approach the altar on Christmas morning—so that she could pass that day in tears—and had fixed the feast of St. John the Evangelist for her to receive communion; and He had enjoined her not to speak to anyone on that day. So she made no reply to the teacher (Friar Giunta calls him a professor of rhetoric). "He was annoyed, and complaining bitterly in a voice sharp with anger and with a look full of scorn, accused her before the friars of ingratitude and pride. While he was storming Margaret remained impassive and preferred to say nothing although the friars themselves implored her to answer. As for me, her unworthy confessor, and Friar Benignus of holy memory, we persisted in commanding her to speak. But Margaret had no intention of obeying her earthly masters when Christ was saying within her; 'I shall see if you answer this man, I shall

see if you prefer me above all creatures.' 'No, Lord,' she answered, 'I shall not disobey you by talking to anyone.' The teacher could rant, the Friars entreat, but Margaret remained silent. Weary of trying, the teacher at last went away. At once Jesus said: 'See, my child, with what strength I have clothed you! How sweet it has been for your soul to keep silence!' "

The Director Directed

IN THIS CASE FRIAR GIUNTA was wrong in pressing her to talk, for she believed herself bound to keep silence by Christ's special desire. But how had he let things reach the point where Margaret no longer wanted to hear anything about her son? The truth is that direction is no longer possible when the directed one is a contemplative lost in God, and the Director a good and simple friar without any personal experience of these mysteries.

A St. John of the Cross, familiar with the higher states, would know how to speak as a master to penitents advanced in the mystical life. But we feel that Friar Giunta Bevegnati was both dazed and baffled by this fiery soul. True, he managed to prevent Margaret from inflicting certain tortures on herself that she had in mind and he forbade her certain too-spectacular penances. But usually he followed her where she wanted to go, anxious only not to lose sight of her; for she belonged to the Friars Minor and he must keep her, alive, to possess her, when dead. The Order watched jealously over its future relic. Meanwhile, the great work for Friar Giunta was to collect the divine words that his penitent heard, sift them, interpret them, give them a certain stamp. Perhaps he tends to emphasise those which exalt the Friars Minor above all other Orders, and those which occasionally flatter Margaret's Director?

But where the child was concerned, he allowed his penitent to go astray. He does not seem to have discerned her

obsession, this happiness that she found in dishonour. What other reason could have lain behind an attitude which gave such scandal? Surely without interrupting her extreme penances she could have given a little time to the education of her son? In the reign of King Henry IV, there was a French *bourgeoise*, Madame Acarie, who, although a stigmatic, remained in the world and brought up her six children with scrupulous care and discipline. It was not until she had put her husband's affairs in order that she introduced the reform of the Carmelites into France.

The time which Margaret could have given to her son need not have been stolen from God, and her ministrations need not have prevented her from practising an absolute detachment with regard to him. She would have loved him, certainly, but as her neighbour and not as the fruit of her body. Her tenderness for him would have been fused and lost in her immense love for Christ. In later years St. John of the Cross, addressing himself to some enclosed nuns, was to say; "Practise the same love and the same detachment towards all human beings, whether they are relations or strangers. Detach your heart equally from the first as from the second; even, in a certain sense, detach it more especially from your relations, lest flesh and blood be re-awakened by the natural love which must always be mortified by those who wish to attain spiritual perfection."

Perhaps Friar Giunta had already taught this doctrine to his penitent. But with Margaret the relative was not a mother or a father or a grown-up son. What woman could love only in God the little boy she had brought into the world? Perhaps a Frenchwoman of the high *bourgeoisie* like Madame Acarie, but not this flaming Italian.

The Child of Sin in a Friar's Habit

EVEN IF MARGARET HAD NOT wanted the world to regard her as a horrible mother, she could not help sacrificing everything—even her son—to her beloved Christ. At the same time she did not feel able to leave him in the world and think of him only in her prayers. Even so, whence came this folly of dragging him after her up this ascent which is forbidden to the feeble soul, without even troubling to find out if he would be strong enough to follow her?

We know from a word which Christ spoke to her on the feast of St. John the Evangelist that she never ceased to love and suffer for him. "Know that your sufferings will increase and that your son, *who will be saved*, will be one of the causes of your martyrdom." This is enough; we know that Margaret was not so detached; that the child, "son of so many tears," was at the very centre of her martyrdom. Only Margaret could have told us how much Our Lord's promise of salvation for her son meant to her. The world could be scandalised, but Margaret held her peace; meanwhile she gave her blood day by day for the child they accused her of abandoning, and delivered him through suffering to everlasting life.

When the saints are accused, they are already defeated, because the Cross is a folly and therefore the motives of their actions elude logic and reason. They can only keep silence, like our mocked Saviour before Herod.

"Your son, who will be saved, will be one of the causes of your martyrdom." This phrase has a second meaning; it suggests to us that the son of sin, no less than his mother, was to endure an inhuman suffering right up to the very end. For Our Lord would not have been at pains to reassure Margaret about the salvation of her son if she had not had reason to doubt it, and it was this doubt that added to her martyrdom. Friar Giunta informs us that the boy entered the Friars Minor. This should have made Margaret very happy. If it had the opposite effect, the little boy must have revolted against a rule which he had not chosen freely, or to which he had only consented to please his mother and because there was no other outlet for him.

Friar Giunta has kept for us the letter Margaret wrote to the young novice at the time of his entry into religion. "Be blessed, my son, by the God to whose service you are consecrated, and if you fight for Him bravely in the ranks of His soldiers, you will always have my affection. I will be your mother if you practise faithfully what I teach you. To begin with, I pray you, by the love of Christ Our Lord, plant humility deep in your soul, and obedience and respect towards the friars—being subject to each one according to his rank and having no preference for anyone . . . Hide nothing from your confessor that he should know . . . an ailing person can only be healed by showing his wounds . . . Let your words be full of sweetness and purity . . . Guard your senses from all sin and read this letter often and keep it till your death."

If he had had the strength to follow this advice, how should he have contributed to his mother's martyrdom? True, he could have abandoned himself to riotous living before entering the friary. Here everything is guess-work. But when the salvation of a young religious is in the balance, we know what it means.

Margaret had fearlessly involved her child in her own life of penance. Could she have thought that when he reached manhood he would feel free to change his course? But there is nothing to show that he chafed under the yoke. The life of the cloister was the only life imaginable to him, the Friars Minor the only family. He was borne along in the wake of Margaret's ascent, transported from the earth: consenting, he followed from afar. After all, he was at the same time the child of a guilty love and the son of a saint. He was born of the two loves by which Margaret had been possessed, torn between the desires of a burning nature and the demands of a terrible Grace—that Grace of which his mother was the victim and which, through her, reached him and snatched him from the world.

The only anecdote about him which Friar Giunta records for us is illuminating in that it shows this conflict between his weak good-will and a flesh and spirit in unconscious rebellion. "One night Margaret's son, overcome with sleep, failed to get up to say matins with the friars. The Father Guardian went to awaken him with a little stick with which he tapped him lightly as a father would. But the young man, forcibly awakened, began to shout and snatched the stick from the Father's hand for fear of being struck again. Immediately he was seized with remorse and tore his face with the hood of his tunic . . ." Margaret, advised of this by an inner vision, summoned him to her and gently rebuked him.

No one in the world is more serenely happy than a good monk. Although the peace he enjoys is the peace of Christ—that is to say, a hard peace to which he remains bound as the crucified to the Cross—yet the religious life gains by this miracle: of being, in the twinkling of an eye, penetrated with the eternal—a river at its estuary, already mingled with the boundless sea.

But there are other monks . . . At the beginning of certain vocations to the priesthood the soul is deflected from its true course; and this happens more often in seminaries than in novitiates. There is no point in concealing those tragic cases, and it is very difficult to assess the responsibility of the Director and the directed; to say how much is due to want of perception on the one hand or to the betrayal of Grace on the other. In the uninterrupted working of Grace on nature, all that is not contributed by man, penetrated and devoured by infinite love though he may be, is nevertheless tributary to the nothingness which is his native element. And this explains those failures and human wrecks which litter the paths of heaven, the corpses half-devoured in the ditches, the skeletons buried under the sand!

From what we have said, if there is nothing to prove that Margaret's son was a bad friar, everything inclines us to fear that he was a restless one. Born of sin and then caught up in the wave of an immense love, he shared the penance which redeemed the sin. If he had lived a sinful life, which was yet happy according to worldly standards, we should not be sorry for him. But Margaret, for her part, knew what her accusers overlook: that in throwing him into the sea, she was throwing him to God.

The child's fate had to resolve itself within the circle of Christ's love for Margaret and of Margaret's love for Christ. It was the fault of no one that he had become a pawn in this desperate game. He was caught between the two adversaries, and there was no way by which he could possibly escape.

And if that shocks our moral sense, let us have the courage to admit that the saints laugh at our moral sense. Margaret suffered and loved beyond all human rule or reason. Alone with her God, she was as isolated with Him as Abraham under the oak-trees of Mambre; in whatever

touched the child of her guilty love, she listened to nothing but the will of God.

Alone with the Eternal, and beyond all rational morality! Even the simple Christian can glimpse at the tragic aspect of this solitude. No interior message and no ecstasy is required to make us understand the significance of that Grace which binds the ephemeral creature to the uncreated Being, for so long as that Grace endures in us. But there are no safeguards for this instant of the state of Grace. A single look, a single thought, a single desire, is enough to make us fall from heaven like a thunderbolt. We have only to wish it to be cast down headlong.

Who would deny that, aside from all particular temptations, the Christian sometimes dreams of closing his eyes and sliding into the abyss—if only to break this exhausting tête-à-tête, if only to escape from a love which, however humble it makes itself, is none the less too much for our cowardice.

"Watch and pray." But the wretched soul dreams of a state of irremediable despair in which it can sleep at last, and where there will no longer be anyone to pray to. O Love, how can I write such things? I do not mean that Love itself is no longer loved. I mean that the rash soul insists on breaking the tête-à-tête and rejoining God by another route—the route which crosses forbidden territory and reaches mercy in the end. As if this crossing could be made without a frightful risk! We know them well, those roads strewn with the corpses of suicides.

Margaret knew what she was doing when she kept her son so severely in sackcloth and ashes.

The Sombre Daughter of Joyous Francis

IT IS RATHER SURPRISING THAT MARGARET, who behaved with such severity and rigour towards her son, should have belonged to the Third Order of St. Francis, and should have been directed by the Friars Minor. She lived in the same country where the seraphic *poverello* had tramped the roads fifty years earlier. She could have heard his companions preach.

Cortona is not far from Assisi. St. Francis went there in 1221 with Friar Silvestro and converted the famous Friar Elias who was later to direct the Order and steer it away from its primitive observances. He made another and better conquest at Cortona: Guido Vagnotelli, a rich young man who welcomed Francis and his companions as if they were angels of God.

Helped by Guido and Friar Silvestro, Francis founded the Celle on the edge of the torrent which falls from Sant-Egidio. He returned there shortly before he died. He went away again under the care of Friar Elias: his hands and legs and stomach were swollen and he could swallow no food. That was why they had to take him back to Assisi.

In 1245 Friar Elias founded the monastery of Cortona where Margaret was later to find protection and help. At that time the Blessed Guido Vagnotelli was among the Friars who lived in the poor convent of the Celle, and it was here that Margaret, smitten with love, had first gone to seek shelter.

Even when she was still a sinner, Margaret must have known all about Franciscan holiness. Before she received forgiveness, Grace handed her over to the Friars Minor. But this in no way deflected her from the most severe mortifications. We might say that her penitential excesses did not prevent her from being a true daughter of St. Francis; but it would be truer to say the opposite—that this very excess marks her out as a member of his family.

Francis's joy; his love of plants and animals; the gift he had to breathe life into inanimate nature; his angelic power to harry the pagan gods, baptising Pan, and harnessing the rain, fire, wind and sun which was his brother, and stars which were his sisters to the triumph of the Son of Man; the faculty of the inspired poet to unite Creator and created within himself—all this makes us overlook his merciless asceticism. The fresh stories of the *Fioretti* obscure for us the blind enfeebled man who waged such a cruel war against his body that at last he himself had pity on his 'brother ass' as he called it. One of his last wishes before dying was to give this poor brother of his a little childish pleasure. He wanted to taste a sweetmeat made of sugar and almonds, *mostacciolo*, that his friend, Jacoba di Settesoli, had brought him from Rome. But he was hardly able to touch it.

Francis was so happy that the world does not notice his stigmata, and forgets that this other Christ also died crucified. When he was alive his contemporaries failed to see beyond his joy to the true face of the poverty he had so rigidly espoused. But when he was no longer there, his disciples saw this bride face to face in all her terrible starkness and bleakness; and many of them were afraid. There followed a merciless conflict between the spiritual disciples—the true heirs of the *Poverello*—and those who hoped to win their salvation reasonably. Implacable poverty became

from then onwards a theme of contention not only in the Order but throughout the whole Church.

Margaret was born, lived and suffered in the midst of this furious controversy which had centred, before her birth, in Cortona, for it was here that Friar Elias of Cortona, St. Francis's successor, put himself at the head of the faction opposed to Holy Poverty.

Surely we can see at once where Margaret's sympathies lay, for she instinctively rushed to the extreme limit of asceticism and followed Francis into the 'furnace' where he himself said love had landed him. And yet she remained faithful to the Church and in that way dissociated herself from the intransigent party—the enemies of corrupt popes and worldly cardinals—for whom the coming of Francis had been like another Incarnation. The *fraticelli* cared little for obedience to Rome; they waited for the world to be set on fire by the spirit, as Joachim of Flora had prophesied. A precedent for such boldness had been set from a high quarter. St. Antony of Padua, so fresh and rosy, before whose statue worthy women to-day mumble prayers to recover their purses, was the formidable opponent of the compromising Elias of Cortona. He thundered against the licentiousness of the Roman court with a violence which Savonarola was afterwards to imitate and which no heretic has ever exceeded.

Margaret's penance differed from the penitence of the seraphic father in this: that joy did not conceal its horror. Although Francis never ceased to lament the errors of his youth, and although he too lived through days of anguish and agony, the memory of his sins could not prevail against his happiness. But there is a great difference between the escapades of Francis's youth, and the *liaison* of nine years during which Margaret was a public sinner. The gay young spark that Francis had once been did not obsess him con-

tinuously, nor haunt him every night of his life. But Margaret was always dogged by her past shame. She did not doubt God's love; it was her own love that was so merciless and refused to recognise the forgiveness she had been granted. She could not resign herself to the outrages she had inflicted on her Beloved during nine years. Yet her penances, though savage, were not dreary or sterile. She entered an Order, cherished a motive and pursued a goal. And the fruits of her endeavour were benefits far outweighing the person of the creature who so afflicted herself. At first the spirit of penance spurred her on, but if her only object had been to expiate her sins, surely her hand would have wearied of its striking. It is only love that can be so persevering, and in fact Margaret sought with a calm determination to live over again the sufferings of her crucified Lord. Her final ambition was to live the life of Christ and that life alone.

And here let us recall to mind—but this time to contradict it—Lacordaire's dictum, "there are not two kinds of love." For nothing is less like the love Christ inspires in His loved ones than human passion. Margaret, like her father Francis and like all the friends of Christ, tried to model herself on her God; she violated nature so as to achieve that conformity. The drama of human passion, on the other hand—the quarrels, disputes, misunderstandings, ruptures, all that misery—is the result of each lover remaining himself, opposing himself to the other, demanding and exacting always. The fusion, the loss of creature in creature, is only achieved in a single moment, in a brief embrace.

A Formidable Grace

AT THE OUTSET OF MARGARET'S LIFE of penance, her grief was only increased by the absolution which gives ordinary Christians a sense of relief. How could she have done what she had done? She awakened those who slept near her cell with her sobs. "The Eternal is a jealous God," she reiterated; an awe-inspiring God who scrutinises the souls He has created. Her remorse was so great that she could only see the Judge in Christ; He had not yet given her words of reassurance. It was necessary that she should pass through that anguish.

Even during her first dialogues with Christ, He sometimes brought her back severely to the horror of her past life. One day she asked Him humbly and in tears to call her "daughter" in the same way as He called her "little poor one;" and the fearful voice replied: "I will not call you my daughter yet because you are the daughter of sin." But He promised her that as soon as she was purified by a general confession He would rank her among His beloved daughters.

She then received a grace which seems to us dreadful if we try imaginatively to apply it to ourselves: Our Lord made her see, one by one, clearly and distinctly, all the faults of her past life down to the smallest sin of thought. There is no doubt that the faculty of forgetting which is bestowed on the ordinary Christian is desired by God. How could we go on if our actions and desires from the time we first began to do wrong were all swarming around us? "If you knew your

sins," Jesus said to Pascal, "you would lose heart," and He did not show them to him. He spared the frailty of the greatest genius what He mercilessly heaped on this poor penitent woman, because He knew what she was capable of bearing.

A French saint, Marie de l'Incarnation, whose life had always been innocent, was subjected to the same ordeal and nearly died of it. "In one second," she writes, "the eyes of my spirit were opened and all the faults, sins, and imperfections which I had committed since being in the world were revealed to me in bulk and in detail with a clarity and distinctness that human endeavour could never have produced. At the same moment I saw myself drenched in blood and my spirit was convinced that it was the blood of the Son of God for the spilling of which I was guilty because of all the sins that had been shown me, and that this precious blood had been spilt for my salvation. If the goodness of God had not upheld me I think I would have died of fear."

In the light of this revelation, which left nothing that Margaret had done or thought of doing in obscurity, it took her no less than eight days to make her general confession. The next day, with a cord round her neck and her head unveiled, she approached the altar trembling. Hardly had she received the Host than a voice within her cried: "My daughter!" Margaret's courage had not wavered at the sight of all her past disgraces rising up from oblivion, but when she was called "daughter" for the first time, she fainted. Ecstasy prostrated her. Friar Bevegnati was there as well as Friar Rinaldo and Friar Ubaldo. From time to time she regained consciousness and murmured: "I am His daughter. He has said it." Witnesses heard her gasping: "O infinite sweetness of my God! O word so long desired! so pressingly besought! Word whose sweetness transcends all sweetness! Ocean of joy! My daughter! It is my God who

has said it! My daughter, it is my Jesus who calls me so!"

It was her first ecstasy. As she uttered these cries of love people came flocking around her, even from the street. There is no need to remind ourselves that this happened in thirteenth-century Italy, because sanctity has the same effect on people to-day. Recently a Bavarian stigmatic, Teresa Neumann, has been living in the same atmosphere of veneration and pious curiosity as Margaret of Cortona. Our saint suffered at being an object of attention. Perhaps she knew already that ecstasies are imperfections which bear witness to our human frailty. She ardently desired secrecy for her love, solitude with her God. Moreover, at a very early date the excesses of her penances had left her unable to move about without pain. She therefore asked Christ for permission not to leave her cell, but He upbraided her severely: "Why do you ceaselessly ask to taste my delights, and refuse the bitterness? Go, and seek no more to hide yourself until I allow you to leave the world."

As soon as it was dawn, she dragged herself to the church of the Friars and was at once prostrated by joy. At twilight she was still there, motionless, inundated with peace.

The Dishevelled Magdalen

WHEN HE COMMANDED MARGARET not to hide herself, Our Lord also forbade her to talk to people except in case of necessity. There is nothing more dangerous for a soul that is bent on sanctification than a consciousness of its own advancement. If Margaret had to remain exposed to the public eye so as to edify those who saw her, it was essential that she should not succumb to vanity. We know that she was tempted in that direction. She had to fight against the thought that Christ had endowed and enriched her with all the virtues, that He had made her so famous that crowds came to visit her!

In order to conquer this temptation she had recourse to a strange means—and one which seems to prove that it would be absurd (contrary to what I previously hoped) not to take into consideration the country and the race of our saint. Certainly a contemplative is first and foremost a contemporary of Christ; under any sky, at any time, she wastes away alone, face to face with her Creator. But this does not alter the fact that what Margaret did at Cortona to vanquish the angel of vanity was possible only in Italy, and in thirteenth-century Italy. "She awaited the silence of the night," records Friar Bevegnati, "and when everyone was sleeping in peace she climbed up on to the terrace above her cell and there, crying and sobbing, she lifted her voice: 'People of Cortona, get up immediately and throw stones at me to chase me from your country, for I am a sinner guilty of every kind of excess.' Weeping, she enumerated the sins of her past life

to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, awakened by her cries. They, being moved and edified, melted into tears and gave thanks to God."

We do not know whom to admire more, the violent saint resembling the dishevelled Magdalen in Titian's last picture (the one that death prevented him from finishing), or the good folk dragged from sleep who, instead of cursing and sending Margaret to the devil, instead of being shocked or laughing at such a noisy display of humility, evinced only pity. They did not point out that the only excess they had the right to think unpardonable was precisely that of preventing them from sleeping.

This love-sick woman, sobbing and wringing her hands under the stars and inviting all the town to witness her repentance, could not have been born in any country save the one which saw the birth of opera. One cannot help thinking, perhaps a little irreverently, that here is the *bel canto* of sanctity, and that the chorus of neighbours is answering the nocturnal *solo* of the *prima donna*. But here is the marvel: that this is not the theatre, that the people of Cortona, and the saint, are expressing in all simplicity the sentiments by which they are stirred.

Perhaps one or two of the spectators had at the back of their minds a misgiving that the angel of vanity was getting full value from this demonstration directed against him. What saint of this country would be capable of imagining that scene? (I am reminded of Marie de Valence, of whom Abbé Brémond tells us "that she did not like to flaunt her sanctity.") We are tempted to exclaim: "What preoccupation with oneself! What importance attached to one's own personality!" but that Margaret's directors foresaw this danger.

When St. Francis had a dispute with his father, the Bishop of Assisi remonstrated with him in terms, says Chesterton,

"full of that excellent good sense which the Catholic Church holds in permanent reserve against the extravagances of her saints." The excellent Catholic good sense of Friar Beveg-nati was put to a severe test by his penitent, whose confession to the stars had by no means quenched her thirst for public humiliations.

Margaret begged her confessor to allow her to go back to Montepulciano where she had lived in luxury—with rich clothes, her hair adorned with gold chains, going out only on horseback or in a carriage, her face made-up, proud of her lover's wealth. She wanted to re-appear there with shaven head, ragged clothes, and begging from door to door. And in case no one should recognise her she wanted a woman to lead her with a string like a blind person and shout at the top of her voice: "My friends, this is Margaret, whose proud bearing, vanity, and behaviour, harmed so many souls among you!"

But the good Friar, who probably would have forbidden the confession on the terrace if he had been consulted, resolutely opposed this ostentatious expedition. He made it plain to Margaret that she must restrain the injudicious fervour of her enterprises, and he forbade her to continue with this project. Margaret insisted, and finally obtained permission to go, not to Montepulciano, but to Laviano, her birth-place. "There, during Mass, in front of the whole populace, with a cord round her neck, she fell prostrate at the feet of a woman called Manentessa, and asked for pardon, bathed in a flood of tears."

None of these excesses disconcerted Friar Beveg-nati, but he condemned them when he considered them condemnable. One day he went so far as to threaten Margaret that he would not hear her confession, when she had thought of a penance which outstripped in horror any that her mad love had hitherto inspired.

A Savage Gesture of Love

EVER SINCE THE GUARDIAN OF THE CELLE had said to Margaret: "You are too pretty," she had waged a ferocious war against her beauty. But some faces cannot be destroyed. The macerations only touch the flesh; they can do nothing against that harmony which lies in the very bonework of a well-constructed face. Margaret battled against this unconquerable charm with the same fanaticism which other women employ to improve their beauty; yet her charm could still surprise her (had she, then, a mirror?). The rage which excites the ugly woman against her ugliness was experienced by Margaret because of her tenacious beauty, but it was multiplied ten times over by the very strength of the love that inspired it. We can imagine Friar Bevegnati's terror when his penitent showed him a razor one day and begged his permission to gash her face, her nose and her lips. In vain she promised not to wound herself mortally; he forbade her to use it and threatened to banish her from his confessional, and from that of the other Friars. Margaret immediately threw the razor away.

Nothing should seem important to us here except the marvellous love which prompted such a brutal gesture. "Burning God, You in whom every excess is permissible . . ." This line by a profane poet goes very deep. There is one thing common to all saints: a love which strives to correspond to the Cross of Our beloved Lord. But each saint has his own particular difficulties to meet and obstacles

to overcome. The sacrifice is the same, but not the victim. A contemplative lacking in physical charm and untouched by carnal love cannot know this appetite for destruction nor these audacities of a holy vengeance.

And there is more to it than this. Asceticism precedes all sanctity and even all reform. In the case of a woman who is bent on a direct mortification of the flesh, the plough of penance must sink to the level of her former sensual satisfactions. The more delicious these had been, the deeper must the plough cut through.

But apart from penance, mere prudence should oblige a sanctified soul to mortify the body that has been pampered for so many years. Even when the soul has reached the state of contemplation, when past sins have not only lost all their attraction but when they so horrify the soul that it would die a thousand deaths sooner than succumb to them again—even then the body which is joined to it retains instincts, habits, reflexes, and a memory. Immanent in the flesh there is a kind of power of recollection: the blood is full of reminiscences.

And so it happens that some souls can place too much confidence in the attraction of Divine things. They can calmly give themselves over to them without any further defiance of their bodies, and then they can have a fearful awakening. From the spiritual point of view there is nothing less foolish than Margaret's apparent folly in trying to destroy her lovely face, and nothing more foolish than the pretension of going to God without having first tamed and subjugated the flesh, and without having taken any precaution against the return of indestructible desires.

Margaret could remember all she had inflicted on her body in the interests of coquetry. Many women starve themselves to 'keep their figure,' as they say; they eat nothing at their meals, and remain standing after them, or else

do painful exercises. Sometimes they even submit themselves to surgical operations. The world is shocked by sufferings inspired by the love of God, and yet it approves the asceticism practised in the service of the devil, just as it excuses the mortal ravages of alcohol and drugs.

"Why," asked Margaret of Friar Bevegnati, "should this body of dust complain of being treated like this for the love of God when it wouldn't raise a murmur if I were treating it in the same way to satisfy my vanity or to serve the world and the devil? One might just as well trust a traitor or a murderer or one's own worst enemy as trust one's body during its lifetime."

The good Friar was hostile to Margaret's unbridled mortifications and one day he implored her to take some food. She answered firmly: "There must never be a truce between my soul and my body, so I have decided not to spare the latter; let me rend it and humiliate it until the end of my life when I shall finally be rid of it. Do not believe it is as weak and feeble as it seems. It assumes this weariness so as to force me to give it another taste of the delights and luxuries to which I had accustomed it in days gone by."

Margaret is perhaps alluding here to the way in which the flesh takes its revenge under cover of the night. For however lost in God a mystic may be, however isolated from the world and protected on the frontiers of his eyes, his lips, and his conscious thoughts, he is powerless against his dreams. He may prolong his vigil at the foot of the Cross and yet when sleep finally disarms him he is defenceless. Nothing can stop the enemy, the sower of tares, from penetrating into his dormant soul. Everything slumbers within this poor faithful being, everything except his body which feigns slumber. Everything is suspended except the power of giving birth to images which are hateful to the soul and adorable to the senses.

A SAVAGE GESTURE OF LOVE

It is the hour when the angelic forces stalk the world—but not only, thank God, the angel that corrupts the darkness. A soul in a state of Grace is surrounded by angels while it sleeps. What God sometimes subjects it to—so as to remind it of the clay that encases it and presses it on all sides—only makes it more appreciative of the mysterious protection of its nights. Often, moreover, the angel that guards it awakens it on the verge of the involuntary crime.

Certainly no action counts which is not governed by the will. But the Enemy expects great things from the disturbance he excites in us. Everything originates in us in spite of ourselves. Our dreams are born of our most intimate self; they are the sons of our flesh; and the most hideous are terrifying precisely because they resemble us so secretly.

These unimagined dregs float to the surface of the sleeping soul. A beast which we thought dead emerges from its den under cover of the night and prowls freely about our fettered being. All that our soul imagined to be stifled and destroyed for ever is still there! How necessary is the intervention of the Virgin and the saints at such a time! We cannot all alone keep watch over ourselves through the hours when all our strength is suspended—all except the basest instincts, the ones most deeply buried, the most intimately mixed with our entrails. It would almost seem that God wants us, guiltlessly, to rub shoulders with sin; that His mercy gives over the faithful soul to a contamination which does not sully it, but abases and crushes it none the less.

These things, which we prefer not to talk about, engage the most vigilant hatred of the saints who feel that they can never do enough against a flesh that is humiliated but not subjected. For the beast is still there, even with the perfect soul. It is a prisoner, but every night sleep pushes half-open the dungeon door.

Margaret mistrusted her body to such a degree of mortifi-

cation that she was hardly able to speak. Even then, she declared that it was feigning illness in order to obtain from her some relief. And, bursting into tears, she cried out one day to her Director: "O my body, why don't you help me to serve your Creator and your Redeemer? You defied Him in the past zealously enough; why can't you use the same zeal to obey Him? Cease your lamentations, cease your simulation of death. Bear this burden that I now impose on you, as in other days you bore your iniquities."

The Poor Soul is Never Reassured

IF MARGARET DID NOT DECEIVE HERSELF into thinking her own inner voice was that of the Bridegroom, she nevertheless feared that the Enemy might trick her by parading as an angel of light. She could not believe that it was really God who spoke to the sinner of Montepulciano. "You are too young and too pretty," the Guardian of the Celle had said to her as he shut the door. She would never forget that curse.

Her sins were always present in her mind, with the result that she refused to believe in the graces that overwhelmed her. Christ had to reassure her ceaselessly. "He who is speaking to you is He whom you crucified." And again: "Love yourself, because I love you." And sometimes the Redeemer's love for the sinner broke forth in words that almost frightened this consumed creature: "You are my daughter because you obey me. You are my bride because I am your only love. You are my mother because you perform in the measure of your strength the will of my Father. There is no one on earth that I love more than you." She protested, stammering: "Put no trust in me, for I was and still am only darkness." She groaned, thinking of all the years she had wasted. "I have come to You too late; I have begun to love You too late!" He assured her: "Too late? But how readily! Too late because you postponed it—but when you came at last, how fervently!"

Sometimes Margaret did not understand the meaning of

certain messages. One morning after communion she heard Our Lord sigh: "Rejoice, my soul!" Was He speaking to Himself, or could He be addressing her? He did not leave her long in doubt: "Rejoice, daughter of Jerusalem, because I have chosen your soul for my dwelling-place. Praise me, I shall praise you. Love me, I shall love you. Serve me, I serve and shall serve you."

Then she was transported with joy. A servant helped her in her infirmities. She covered her head with a veil made of pieces of stuff sewn together which she often shared with the poor. Sometimes she stripped herself to the point of nakedness, and stayed in her cell wrapped in rush matting. Her nourishment consisted of raw grass, nuts and almonds. During meals she wept and, forgetting to eat, remained motionless, her spirit suspended. Since she was incapable of standing after communion Our Lord sometimes took pity on her and said: "You may rest your head on the cushion . . ."

I hear someone whispering: "Aren't you tired of all this unreason?" Now and again one does feel outraged by such a sustained offensive against nature. The presence of Our Lord in a simple family home; it is evening; the children are round the table; the father bends his heavy forehead over the steaming soup, while his wife, no longer aware of her tiredness, gets up constantly to serve them all. There is the narrow, confined life that centres round some humble corporal duty, where there is detachment from oneself and one's own lot and no possibility of seeing visions or dreaming dreams. There is the sanctity of those poor women who don't even know what sanctity is—faithful to the little ones they have brought into the world and to a husband grown ugly with years and brutalised by his job; he, too, is crucified, but on an inglorious cross—the factory, the office.

You show us a mad life which bears no resemblance to

anything we know. A hand with the stigmata means less to us than a hand cracked and coarsened with laundering.

The truth is that there are special vocations. God has ordained that love, in its pure state, shall be made manifest in a few chosen creatures only; in the lives of the rest of us it is all mixed up with our day-to-day activities. The vocation of a few souls is to be consumed. A few selected victims consent to drink to the very dregs the cup of which a few drops are enough to make the ordinary Christian worthy of being called a child of God.

These holy victims cannot reconcile themselves to the surfeit of evil in the world; they refuse to accept hell although they believe in it; they cry out against what sin has made of creation. They appeal to love, to their God who is love. With sublime liberality they cast the weight of their suffering into the scales to counterbalance the sins of the world.

The ordinary Christian enjoys his sense of peace after communion; he breakfasts with whetted appetite; he decides on his good action for the day; he writes an edifying letter to a friend; he attends to his business; and all the while watches his neighbour lose his soul with a pity not unmixed with an obscure satisfaction. Let us allow there to be some people so desperately tender that they cannot reconcile themselves to the loss of so many souls: they dedicate themselves, cast themselves into the fire, so that the number of the chosen shall not be small.

Much as I love Pascal, I detest the sombre pleasure he takes in being chosen while remaining convinced that practically nobody else has been chosen with him. I detest the spiritual gluttony which makes him seek out and savour a particular drop of blood shed for himself alone—for himself, not for anyone else. Has a Jansenist ever cried to his merciless God: "I choose to be eternally confounded with

the numberless crowd of those whom you have rejected?"

The saints upset the hideous logic of Port-Royal; they shatter the system; they bring their adorable disorder into the nice reckonings of predestination. Margaret, you poor tortured woman, the gestures of your folly sometimes repel us: but this folly proves its reason at the doors of the dungeon where we wait in the expectation of a final despair, and where, here and now, we should have had to expiate the sins of being ourselves.

Each Lamb is the Favourite but does not know it

GOD REPROACHED MARGARET for the fears she still felt in spite of the graces which He showered upon her, and yet He wanted her to feel fear. He wanted to glorify her but He did not want her to glorify herself. Humble as she was, this penitent, her humility had to resist His overpowering assurances: "You are my daughter, my friend, whom I love more than any other living woman on earth."

More than any other woman! The French translator of Friar Bevegnati is very much struck by this and points out that Margaret was a contemporary of St. Gertrude, Angela of Foligno, and St. Juliana of Falconieri. And I must confess that in glancing at the revelations of St. Gertrude I at once came on this assurance of Christ's concerning Gertrude: "No one is nearer to me than this beloved bride. There is no creature on earth towards whom I lean with such delight" (1, 3). The good translator should not take literally the approximations which commentators give us of God's ineffable communications to His chosen creatures. Infinite love gives Himself wholly to each of those whom He has drawn to the threshold of the beatific vision while they are still in this world: each lamb is the favourite.

But in so far as we may venture to interpret a desire of God's, it would seem that He hoped to glorify Margaret without her deriving from this any occasion of pride. In the words that were said to St. Catherine of Siena, "He who is"

overwhelms and overpowers "her who is not." The chosen creature must not at any moment of her prodigious fortune lose the conviction that she is nothing.

It seems strange that this should be so. The ordinary Christian finds it difficult to understand how a soul that is sanctified and transported in God can forget itself to the point of not being interested in its own experience; how it can refrain from being dazzled by what is happening to it.

One of our difficulties in the spiritual life is that the soul sees itself praying. As soon as it is touched by fervour it immediately observes the fervour; it listens to itself talking to God. However much it may desire to be honest in the eyes of Him who sounds the heart, it hears its own secret words, is aware of its own attitude, traces the path of its tears, and knows the effect it produces. How can it escape from this game before the looking-glass? The creature is an audience at his own colloquy with the Creator and cannot help seeing its reflection multiplied many times over.

This proves that the wretched soul has not even begun to detach itself. A Margaret of Cortona does not see herself any more. She seems mad only because it is a long time since she has really seen herself or had any but the smallest control of her comportment. The saints appear to be mad because they are literally outside themselves; outside themselves but within Another. They breathe, they move, in the Infinite Being.

The Sinner Looks no Higher than the Cross

MORE THAN ANY OTHER CONTEMPLATIVE, Margaret feared the peril of yielding to self-satisfaction and self-complacency. She used her past which horrified her and her youth which she considered criminal as a bulwark against the pride and satisfaction she might have felt in being loved by God. A Gertrude, who never knew any other fold or any other pasture than the convent, and who certainly, from the time she was a child, can only have confessed the most trivial faults, seems quite unarmed against vanity, when we compare her with the penitents—a Magdalen, a Margaret or an Angela. The fact is that even when passions have been expiated a thousand times over, they leave scars which seem horrible in the light of pure love. In the measure that Christ gains empire over a soul, that soul sees its stains more clearly and has a closer knowledge of the price that He who assumed them had to pay. Moreover, a contemplative-penitent always meditates on Christ in His agony: she never loses sight of the active part she personally played in the sacrifice of Calvary during each separate moment of her vicious life. She leaves it to others to meditate on a glorious Christ or, like that little Carmelite of Dijon, Elizabeth of the Trinity, who died in 1906, to live with the three Divine Persons in a mysterious familiarity.

For it is a mistake to imagine that all saints live like Margaret, with their eyes fixed solely on the Cross. When the Spanish Anne of Jesus, a companion of St. Teresa, came

to France in 1604 to establish the Carmelites, the meditations of the first French Carmelites astonished her. "I am trying to make them meditate on and imitate Our Lord Jesus Christ," she wrote, "for they do not seem to think of Him very much here. They seem only to meditate on God: I don't know how it can be so . . ." and she denounces the influence of the writings of St. Denis. And it is true that Bérulle, who was the spiritual adviser of the first French Carmelites, was particularly devoted to the Father, as the Jesuit Lallemant was to the Holy Ghost.

Here was plenty to disconcert a daughter of St. Teresa. Yet an exclusive devotion to the sorrowful mysteries was not practised by all the Spanish mystics. Once St. John of the Cross asked a nun what was her special devotion and she answered that it was the contemplation of the beauty and the grandeur of God. The saint was so delighted with this answer that it inspired this verse of the *Cantico*: "Let us rejoice, beloved one—and let us see ourselves in your beauty—on the mountain and on the hill—there where pure water gushes—let us enter farther into the depths . . ."

There are many mansions on the highest terrace of the Father's house. But the former concubine of the lord of Montepulciano was a stranger to such a sublime devotion; she breathed and moved only under the olive trees of the agony, in the dust of the pretorium; she clasped the body of her God tied to a pillar; she bled with Him as He was flogged; she joined the following crowd while He dragged His gibbet, its weight crushing her as well as Him. And it was Christ Himself who showed her that place in His open heart, in His striped flesh, crowned with thorns and hung by three nails.

Certainly the humiliated woman of Cortona, the sorrowful unmarried mother, knew those moments when visions

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and words are left far behind; she too had advanced beyond everything to meet God. But always she had to retrace her steps so as to kneel in the humble place assigned to her, no higher than the pierced feet of Jesus Christ.

It was not in Holy Week but during the Octave of the Epiphany that she heard this injunction: "Return to my Cross. Continue to weep at my feet. You should neither withhold nor hide your sorrow." One Easter Sunday she was not allowed to partake in the general rejoicing over her God's resurrection; instead, Our Lord Himself sent her back to her meditation on the sorrowful mysteries. The Jesus of Margaret rose from His tomb only to begin again the terrible ascent, and He dragged his penitent after Him.

He did not reveal to Margaret, as He did later to Catherine Emmerich, the unknown circumstances of His passion. But He caused her to know the particular part that each of us played among the torturers. In the *Mystère de Jésus* there are the words: "I shed *this* drop of my blood for you"; and through Margaret Christ enables each one of us to answer: "And I, I gave you *that* stripe, that blow; this is where I spat upon you."

In the quotation that follows, one certainly feels that the good Friar Bevegnati has been editing the words a little, that he has some idea at the back of his mind. But how sublime they must have been in their first outpouring, when Margaret captured them at the source!

"I shall tell you who are the people who crucify me. First there are the Judases: those who talk, eat, drink, sleep with men in order to assassinate them. Then those who strip me and cast lots for my garments are the murderers on the highway. The Jew who drags me before Pilate is the same man who condemns his neighbour, or causes him to be condemned, on false proof and false accusations.

"Who tears at my hair? Goldsmiths, merchants, artists,

and all lovers of profit. Who flogs me and ties me to the pillar? Bandits of the field and forest when they bind, whip, and mutilate other men and demand ransom. They who raise a hand against the clergy and religious strike me also. Then there are those who evict tenants from their houses and reduce them to beggary, thieving and fornication—these stretch me on the Cross, a Cross so narrow and short that I cannot rest my head.

“Casuists crucify me and those who give evil counsel and make unjust laws and say against their conscience: Do this. Who hides his face from me like a robber? Fornicators and adulterers. Blasphemers and dissimulators spit on me. Who gives me gall and vinegar to drink and torments me unto death? The man who gives himself over to the unmentionable vice and to the sin which is against nature.

“Those who see my body on the altar and refuse to believe that I am there insult me on the Cross. Bad prelates are so many Herods and, like Herod, they mock me. My mercy shelters them now, but warn them that my justice will not spare them.

“My daughter, I see more Jews among the Christians than there were around Pilate. They re-open the wounds in my body so that even if my body were as big as the world there would be no point the size of a pin-prick but it would be lacerated by their crimes. More Jews crucify me to-day than at the time of my passion.”

This terrible plaint goes on, leaving Margaret so prostrate that Christ suddenly relents. “You have embalmed my wounds with your tears and you have taken me down from the Cross.”

If this was Margaret’s meditation on Easter Sunday, what must it have been on the anniversary of the death of Christ? We might be tempted to doubt Friar Bevegnati’s testimony but that he recounts only what he saw. One Good Friday

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Margaret, at the extreme limit of suffering, left her cell and, her head shaved and drunk with grief, ran through the street uttering piercing cries. She arrived at the church of the Friars Minor. She dared not, for fear of the Friars, renew the same scene in all the churches.

No one jeered at her. Even so singular a creature as this could realise her personal destiny in the city of Cortona. The Sulamite ran through the streets in search of her beloved and no one commented on it. The Song of Songs re-echoed through the city. But if the beloved was perhaps black—*nigra sum sed formosa*—since she sometimes smeared her face with soot, she no longer seemed to be so beautiful as the woman of the sacred text: her head was shaved and covered with ashes. For the ravishing creature had just re-lived in her body all the tortures of the Passion. She emerged, disfigured, from an ocean of pain. But this burnt-alive creature could also have sung: "I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth; I sought him, but I found him not: *per vicos et plateas quaeram quem diligit anima mea: quaesivi illum sed non inveni.*"

The Opinion of St. John of the Cross

THOSE WHO ARE DISCONCERTED by all these excesses would do well to remember that other saints have stifled in themselves their desire for the sensible presence of Our Lord. St. John of the Cross would not have allowed a penitent to be so insatiable that she could not live unconsolated by divine visitations.

He would perhaps have frowned on this prayer of Margaret's: "Where is the joy of Your presence now which I seek over and above everything?" John of the Cross apprehended the Infinite Beauty over and above all messages and visions. He expressly condemned those people who turn the words they hear while at prayer into divine communications. He even made fun of them: "They say *God told me, God answered*, and yet it is usually they who are speaking to themselves."

The saint says: *usually*. He does not, then, condemn them all. Moreover, in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (Book II, chapter 31) he carefully defines the communications which he calls "substantial" and distinguishes them from those which he calls "successive" or "formal," in that they truly imprint in the soul what they signify—"as it would be, for example, if Our Lord said to a soul: love me, and at the same instant the soul experienced and felt within itself the substance of love."

And indeed this seems to be the kind of communication received by Margaret of Cortona. But St. John of the Cross

would surely have considered the distracted demands of our saint as a dangerous weakness. He certainly would not have forbidden her the contemplation of Christ in His humanity, but he would not have encouraged her to linger there too long.

Probably it was not only love that made Margaret sigh after the sensible presence of Christ with such an anguished fervour. The fact was that she needed to be reassured: her fear was by no means vanquished in spite of so many graces. One day she needed nothing less to give her assurance than to see the Virgin asking Christ to hasten her entry into Heaven. She saw this in an ecstasy and when she came to herself again she was at peace; but, like St. Teresa, she died of not dying.

Then she bound herself by an oath not to ask for consolations any more. At the same time she became more secretive and when she meditated on the Passion she forced herself to hide her sorrow. But the inner voice took her up on this point: "It was your habit in the past to reveal by your tears the grief that my Passion caused you. Now the fear of whisperings and of seeming to seek after vain-glory makes you silent. Continue to cry at my feet. Do not hold back or hide your sorrows."

What answer would St. John of the Cross have made to a penitent who confronted him with such orders received from Our Lord Himself? And yet nothing is more credible than that Christ should want this poor woman to make manifest to everyone the mystery of a crucified God. A penitent should be living a sermon on the Crucifixion, either before her death like Margaret or after she has left the world like Teresa of the Child Jesus: these faithful lamps do not burn in order to be put under a bushel. The great solitary eagles like St. John of the Cross soar far above the crowd and draw other chosen eagles along in their wake. But, ac-

according to the needs of the time, God hides in the middle of the towns creatures less sublime who love, suffer and expiate at the earth's level and at the height of man. But in the end the most humble join hands with the most exalted in the same nakedness and in the same joy.

But for all that, what would our fevered Margaret have made of this reply given by St. John of the Cross to a Carmelite nun: "My daughter, I always betake my soul within the Holy Trinity, and it is there that my Lord Jesus Christ desires that it should be."

It was there, too, where she could apprehend her Lord not in His visible humanity but in His essential Divinity, that the anguish of this ardent and inconsolable Magdalen was appeased, and her cries silenced. John of the Cross would have cured her of her disproportionate austerities, and taken her along a road where they lose their significance in the darkness of that dark night which is "the privation of taste in the appetite of all things." All things: spiritual as well as sensible. To denude oneself of everything that is not God is to renounce everything that concerns the flesh, that goes without saying, but it is to renounce the heart also. It is to apprehend God in the pure darkness of Faith alone.

One Whit Sunday Margaret was surprised at not having received some special sign of Grace. "I tell you," replied Our Lord in answer to her complaint, "that you have on the contrary received a very great grace, but you have not noticed it." Friar Bevegnati is obviously recording for us here an exhortation from Christ not to confuse Grace with the movements of sensibility.

Another day Our Lord said to her: "You always want to draw the sweetness from the very spring of my heart, although I have received from you so much bitterness. You always want to be saturated, glutted, whereas I have been starved of your greeting . . ." And again: "My daughter,

do not fear: if you do not savour the consolations you desire, I am nevertheless with you when you call to me with tears . . . But you can never have enough of my presence."

Soon Margaret was to receive another inspiration to cure her of this avidity. A dwelling-place was shown to her in a dream: the cell at the foot of the citadel where Christ desired that she should be. But to reach it she exhausted herself in crucifying disputes. This other cell, higher and more solitary, the last halting-place on the edge of the abyss, is also the image of another prayer, and a more naked contemplation. This is the contemplation which leads the soul up to the unimaginable union, but there were still dark passages on its route.

The Martyrdom of the Queer Animal

WHEN MARGARET WAS STANDING on the threshold of her final joy, she had to pass through a hell which she had not foreseen. The severest self-denials and the most rigorous fasts are nothing beside the trials that others invent for us. The only real tortures are those which we have not chosen for ourselves.

One day Christ gave Margaret a warning: "Be strong and take courage, Grace will increase with your troubles. Ask your confessor to tell Friar John (of Castiglione) to pray for you urgently, for you are going to have great troubles. Both of them will have their doubts concerning you, and these doubts will remain in the minds of a certain number of people until the day of your death."

And He said to her: "You will suffer very great pain. But when you are bereft of all spiritual consolation, remember what your confessor said to you: that when your thirst for me was strongest, I was always there in your heart."

One day in an ecstasy she received the following threat: "You desire to be a daughter of milk but you will be a daughter of gall." Later, when she was already in the refuge of her last cell and quite stupefied by all that she had to endure, Christ was to remind her: "Did I not warn you that you would be suckled from the wound of my heart?"

The ordeals that Margaret was destined to undergo all came from this publicity, this excitement which her ecstasies provoked. She could hardly have borne it if it had not produced such excellent results. Penitents besieged Friar Bevegnati's confessional in such numbers that he had to call a halt. "Your confessor reproaches you with sending so many men and women to his confessional—men and women that your tears and prayers have caused to come to me; and he sends them away on the grounds that he cannot clean so many stables in one day!"

These souls made it worth Margaret's while to be exposed to the public eye; but love always seeks silence and secrecy. And no soul would desire solitude more ardently than a soul wounded by Christ—unless it remembered that its God was crucified naked in front of the whole crowd. Those who make themselves one with Him must share the humiliation of being exposed and handed over to the casual passer-by.

But it was not only Margaret's friends who went in and out of the cell and chapel where her ecstasy and agony could hardly be distinguished from each other. Certainly the "poor ones" of the hospital, the Moscari family, holy women, and Friars would have clustered around her, but also inquisitive and jealous people, and people who wished her no good and who were only to be seen in their true colours later on. On every calvary and around every cross there are men who wag their heads and shrug their shoulders and take pleasure in abusing the victim.

After suffering, second by second, the horrors of the Passion, Margaret opened her eyes: she found herself in the Friars' chapel without remembering having gone there. A tear-stained crowd watched her suffer the same tortures as

Our Lord and imagined that she would die His death. But already some sneers mingled with the groans of the faithful. The medieval crowd was not unlike the crowd of to-day: at Lourdes the Host is lifted up in the midst of the kneeling throng and the prostrate sick, but the mockers look on from afar.

On emerging from this hell, Margaret lost control of her actions. She went out into the streets and asked questions of those who had seen her terrifying ecstasy. "Where shall I go in my misfortune?" she cried, "where shall I find Him? Oh, if I could see You, how You would overwhelm me with a joy that has no end! I seek, I sigh, I call, I watch, I strive, because the most cruel death has snatched You from my love. O angels, men, all of you, creatures, tell me where is my crucified God. Alas, what have I done, Lord, for the Infinite Goodness to treat me so cruelly? My love, why have You forsaken me? Where are You hidden? I want to see You and hear You . . . I am so unhappy that I wonder why I should go on living."

She remained in this state without eating or sleeping but devoured by anguish till the following Sunday. And then she once again made a spectacle of herself by interrupting the good Friar's sermon with the eternal wail of Mary Magdalen: "Know you where is my crucified Lord? Where have you laid Him?"

In his notes the Friar humbly admits that his sermon would not have drawn a single one of the tears which he saw streaming down the faces of the people around Margaret. But more than one of those present must have said in his heart: "She's just a poor mad woman." And some who had believed in her began to have misgivings that the whole thing could only end up in a lunatic asylum.

And it was to some people's interest to foster this opinion. Margaret had made certain enemies among the avid devotees who forced her door. A public saint belongs to everyone. People stared at her and spied upon her for fear that she would run off and die in a rival city and her body fall into alien hands. The body of a saint does not draw only spiritual graces. The humblest inhabitant of Cortona felt that he had rights over Margaret.

The Saint at the Mercy of the Devout

FROM THE HEIGHT OF THE CROSS where Margaret hung with her Lord she found it difficult to understand these matters and to enter into these disputes. People would crush around her as they would crush around the gates of a circus or jostle for a view of someone being punished; they would fight to see her as they would fight for a place at a public torture or execution.

One day a woman, annoyed that everyone should pass freely in and out of the saint's cell, decided to mount guard and maintain order. We know the sort of self-important person who barks round Catholic parades, the pious busy-body who sees that the lines are straight, the flies that buzz round processions: the race is still with us. Well, this woman took it on herself to send away the good souls who were milling around the saint. But one of them took this very badly and presently they began to abuse each other.

The ecstatic, torn from her contemplation by the bawling of the two housewives, gently invited the one who wanted to enter to spend the night with her, and at the same time tried to send away the over-zealous sentry whose fury immediately turned upon herself. Friar Bevegnati does not tell us what insults she had to endure; but there is no doubt that the enraged woman would have reminded Margaret of the faults she so often bewept in public and made allusion to the assassinated lover, the bastard child . . . In order to check this flow of mud the saint resolved to pass the night outside

her cell and in company with this shrew. She humbly asked for a place in her house, but so far from being touched by this, the termagant refused to have her.

The ill-wishers, ever on the look-out, soon had an excellent opportunity of making themselves felt. Margaret, who deprived herself of everything, could not do without a servant. Her body, exhausted by penance, was also broken by ecstasies—for it was the vase of her own body that Magdalen broke at the feet of God.

In the eyes of Christians this physical misery of the saints is a real misery. It is not on account of their weaknesses but in spite of them that they are saints. The breath of God burns the imprudent creature who comes too near.

Margaret was entirely dedicated to penance and she had no other mission in life than to conform her steps unremittingly to the steps of the Master. We need not therefore be surprised that she was more exhausted than any other saint by the torture that would end only with her death. But the woman who helped her and before whom she laid herself bare profited by her trust and abused it.

It was one of her duties to go from house to house with a little flask to collect the small amount of wine that Margaret had been ordered to drink. It was a rule that she should never go more than once a month to the same house. But the servant did not obey this injunction. Furnished with a large bottle she often went back to people who had been generous and repaid their generosity with stories at Margaret's expense.

This was quite enough to sow the seeds of doubt in people's minds. Friar Giunta sent the impudent woman away, but considerable scandal had already been caused. Where did she come from after all, this Margaret? She was reverting, if not to her first amours, then at least to certain excesses which had not frightened her formerly at Monte-

pulciano, and for which she was now using her physical weakness as an excuse. Certain scenes, which ingenuous people interpreted as manifestations of Grace, might easily be the ravings of a drunkard.

Even those who remained loyal to her were secretly shaken. Some of the Friars, perhaps Friar Giunta Bevegnati himself, began to be less certain of her sanctity. They still believed in it, since they refused her the refuge of that cell which she had seen in a dream at the foot of the fortress, fearing that she might die outside their surveillance and that her precious remains might fall into other hands. But they questioned themselves on the subject: was there not some devilry mixed up in the affair?

This was how Margaret underwent the unknown ordeal—the one which we do not choose for ourselves but which others choose for us. The experiences of the saints show that it is not enough that we should want to be crucified with Christ; we must be crucified on a Cross which is not of our own choosing.

In every saintly life, and even in every Christian life, there may be many crosses sought out or endured, but there is only one *true* cross, only one which counts and of which we have no warning. Sometimes it discovers itself quite late in our lives; we have to get over the dark storm of youth before it can make itself apparent; it emerges little by little from the mist of passion. There it is, all of a sudden, and we hardly dare to recognise it. It only remains for us to stretch ourselves upon it with love.

The Impossible Adaptation to the World

THIS TUMULT IN THE SAINT'S CELL, this drunken gossiping servant, these wretched scandals aroused by the saint's ecstasy—all this could hardly have been avoided, and it only shows the tragic inadaptability of the contemplative life to the demands of the world. And what leaps to the eyes of an ecstatic is true in a less degree for everyone who takes the Christian life seriously—and for the Catholic Church in its entirety. That revealed truth should contradict the world, that it should only take root and persist there thanks to defeats, concessions and minimisings is a rather disconcerting fact, when one thinks of it.

The Gospel announced that the time was at hand. The first Christian generation waited from one day to the next for the return of the Lord; it scrutinised heaven and earth for signs presaging the Parousia. Christ's law made a frontal attack on a world condemned and on the point of disappearing. The Christian virtues—poverty, chastity and obedience—glorified what the world hated above everything. The faithful turned their backs on a criminal century whose consummation they were expected to see, and already they were spiritual inhabitants of the Kingdom which is not of this world.

They are dead. More numerous than the sands of the sea, the generations have passed, and now it is our turn; we are the first Christians awaiting the Parousia. The only comment on this subject which has not misled us occurs in an epistle

of St. Peter's when he reminds us that for God a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day.

So the Church had to install herself within time, although she was born for the end of time. How this sunset drags on, at least if we measure it against the ephemeral passage of one human generation! The Church is holy, and a Christian is holy only in opposition to the wind and the tide. They are holy in so far as they despise the material conditions of their earthly establishment. As the saints conform themselves to Christ, they seem to us more and more exiles from ordinary life and more and more unadapted to it. They seem to us dying of an inability to die.

Christ's enemies (secret or declared) and His most ardent friends are agreed on this. Pierre Bayle, commenting on Pascal, applauds him for believing that there are hardly any true Christians—which proves to his eyes that pure Christianity is impracticable. No doubt St. Cyran is heretical and I know well that we are allowed to find reassurance in certain formulas, such as "Possess as if you didn't possess." It is taken for granted that, in spite of Christ's maledictions, even the rich can be saved, and St. Francis de Sales introduced the Philotheas of the court and the world to the spiritual life and even initiated them into pure love. But we must believe that they arrived there only by a wrench less spectacular but perhaps equally cruel as that which so frightens us in our Margaret.

The truth is that from the first moment of striving towards perfection, the Christian must play traitor to his human interests and renounce "the delicious and criminal ways of the world." This epigram of Pascal's is Jansenist only in appearance. For a soul that love has touched there is no longer anything in the world, nor in itself, which does not derive more or less from one of the three lusts denounced

by St. John: *libido sciendi, libido sentiendi, libido dominandi*.

This nakedness which the humble Margaret of Cortona strove after with sobs and cries and which her Italian expressiveness made so conspicuous, is less instinctively harsh in the more cultured saints, those nursed in philosophy and letters. But perhaps it is equally terrible in its results. Certainly the most ordinary Christian finds his cross soon enough and does not have far to look, but there is more than one way of embracing it: the saints stretch themselves on it naked. It is here that Margaret proves her likeness to all her brothers and sisters in Christ. Only the saints are capable of giving that last tug at the garment wrapped about our secret wound. We die in the Lord if He wishes it, we ordinary Christians, we hope. But we die still draped in a last pride, a last ambition, an affection which we have not fully extinguished. Sanctity is naked.

Sanctity—Source of all Joy

YET THE CROSS IS ONLY opposed to “normal, simple” life in so far as it is opposed to our desires; there is no opposition in reality. The Cross is opposed to voluptuous, conquering life, *life as we dream it*, as we imagine we enjoy it at certain times; it is not opposed to life *as it is*. The saints do not introduce the Cross into their lives, they find it standing there. And instead of distracting themselves from it, in Pascal’s sense, by pleasure and play, or fleeing it by means of the thousand loopholes that men have discovered (from tobacco and alcohol to drugs and all the disguises of suicide), they question it, they tear from it its secret of joy and love. We are at liberty to think them the victims of a comforting illusion; but not that they bring to human life horrors any worse than those it harbours already. For the people who deny the Cross and worship pleasure are no less crucified than the saints.

The saints have never maintained that pain is a good in itself. They know it is an evil, a consequence of original sin. They do not deny that human life, especially in its beginnings, can have its moments of happiness. They themselves have often tasted their sweetness.

“ . . . Farewell, joy of my youth, heedless folly, the care-free happy life at the foot of the Vesuvius! Farewell, festive meals, evening chats, serenades beneath gilded balconies! Farewell, Naples and its women, masquerades by torchlight, long suppers in the shade of woods! Farewell, love and

friendship . . .” The young Francis, prince of Assisi’s youth, would not have been at all shocked by this farewell to the sweets of life poured forth by the romantic Octave in the *Caprices de Marianne*. For Francis of Assisi and our Margaret both knew wild masquerades, the passions of the heart, the sweetness of an enchanted youth. It may be that because they were destined for sanctity they attached even more importance to these earthly joys than we do ourselves. All the drawbacks—the morrows of intoxication, the emptiness of pleasures with the illness and death which haunt them, the inconstancy of love with its savageries, its betrayals, its defilements—nothing of all this made them blind to the meaning of that hunger and thirst for happiness; a happiness they could realise by the love which desire discovered in them. They knew that there are infinite moments even in the most miserable attachments. Human art teaches us this same lesson in its supreme flowering; Mozart reveals to those who love him the mystery of a ravishing happiness near and at the same time inaccessible. The saints who began with sin were mistaken as to the object of their desire; they do not deny their hearts’ desire, but they have learnt to substitute being for nothingness in order that the desire may be fulfilled.

This way of the Cross which they tread, this suffering which they seek out and foster, is not cherished for itself: it is a road, a short-cut to the object of their adoration. And because they know, as we learn from the writings of St. John of the Cross, that what is born of the world is the world and what is born of the flesh is the flesh and that “God never communicates Himself either by the world or the flesh,” they mortify in themselves the desires of the senses, the appetites. Abnegation alone brings them near to a Beloved who lives on the other side of the body, on the other side of the creature; who awaits them over and beyond

all passion and all desire. These maniacs of suffering are really fanatics of joy; that is why they sacrifice without pity everything that separates them from joy.

No one is happy except the saints. "Joy! Joy! tears of joy!" Any saint, even among the torments of his burnt-up life, can echo Pascal's cry in his heart and on his lips at any moment. And sometimes even the most wretched, the feeblest and the least crucified Christian has experienced those tears of joy in spite of his sin-stained life and impoverished faith.

Our Margaret, in spite of her martyrdom, never ceased, as it were, to exult in her Lord. "O Father," she cried, "my resurrection and my life, my bridegroom, my joy, O life of my life!" Her confessor assures us that in the course of an ecstasy she was flooded with such happiness that she thought her heart would break. One night (it was the feast of St. Clare) there was an angel in her cell. As he blessed her "she suddenly felt herself fired by a love so ardent that, unable to contain her inner joy, she let it overflow . . . When I begged her to explain this strange joy, she said that it was this seraph's special privilege to fire hearts with an unspeakably joyful love."

This "strange joy" is the common heritage of the friends of Jesus Christ. What a jubilant symphony it would make if we were to collect all the sayings which bear witness to this unimaginable joy—from the cry of the first martyr Stephen whose face was that of an angel, to the exaltations of St. Augustine and the marvellous prayers of St. Gertrude to her "Jesus of the evening"; from the outbursts of the Catherines and Teresas to the Canticle of St. John of the Cross and the ejaculations of our Marie of the Incarnation! "You are called fire, no, my love, you are not fire, you are not water, you are none of the things we say. You are what you are in your eternal glory. You are!"

Now and again the ordinary Christian loses patience. Who has ever loved like that? Who has ever felt that sort of love? What wise or balanced spirit could conceive of such inhuman love?

The truth is that this sort of love is never talked about. Human passion is analysed, solemnised and exalted by all literature, all music, all painting. On the wireless from dawn till twilight innumerable romantic stories celebrate the cult. There is an unbelievable disproportion between what men hear said about love and what they experience of it in the course of their miserable lives.

But divine love is silent. The humble of heart do not betray their secret, for they know that men will not understand it. It is an incommunicable charm. To let others into the secret of this wonder would be to destroy it.

God allows it to be betrayed now and again in a cry. We accidentally come across a piece of paper where a man has scribbled for himself alone something which transcends all human language. There is Pascal's *Mémorial*, or the *Mystère de Jésus*, every word of which still touches us with fire.

If all those who have cause to understand what intoxicates the mystics could speak, it would be seen that the love of God is offered to more people than one imagines. "Perhaps," whispers the Enemy, "but it is always the same sort of person: everything goes to show that one either is or is not disposed to the spiritual life; just as some people have the gift of languages, so others have the gift of God."

It is true that some men are born lovers just as others are born mystics; nor is there an abyss between these two vocations. Many people, especially women, pass from one to the other. What Madame de Sevigné said about Jean Racine—that he loved God as he had loved his mistresses—is borne out in many destinies. What an admirable love of

MARGARET OF CORTONA

God have we sometimes been privileged to see in aged women! Though they are still seared with the terrible fire, and although their faces are ravaged by all the tears of a tortured life, it is now the tears of a sacred joy that they shed—and the new tears cover up the traces of the earlier flow.

Abandoned by Men and by the Father

IN THE OCTAVE OF ST. FRANCIS Our Lord again told Margaret that some of the Friars Minor would detach themselves from her. "You will be darkness for the eyes of light," He said, and added: "Those who think you are in darkness will know you for what you are when they are dead, and they will be ashamed."

But the ordeal sustained at the hands of the Friars Minor was nothing to Margaret compared with that other abandonment which is the supreme ordeal of the saints. The little Teresa of Lisieux died of it more certainly than of consumption; it is a hell which none of these consumed souls has been spared. The Master warned His servant of it in advance: "I shall and I shall not be with you. I shall clothe you with my Grace, but you will not know it, for, while I am within you, you will not recognise me."

He did not keep from her His plan to initiate her into a higher state. "You have passed the first steps by which one arrives at Grace. I want you to climb higher in the knowledge of myself. Just as I hid my power on the Cross, I hide myself from you so that you may discover by yourself what you are without me."

He was to drag her as far as a creature can go without dying—to the very threshold whence there is nothing left but to pass to eternal life. "My daughter—they have gossiped about your charity but you will be crowned in

heaven (because you have had more compassion for the flowing of my blood than any other creature and no one weeps my death as you do)—My daughter, I have been in tribulation, and you shall be afflicted also; I have been crushed, you shall be crushed also; people have murmured against me, and you shall suffer from the same murmurings; I am now in glory, and one day you too will be raised to glory. But I say to you again: your sufferings will be redoubled."

In telling her of all that she would suffer, He showed her the same path that all the great mystics have trodden before reaching the ultimate delights of the transforming union. "Daughter of tribulation and glory and grandeur, your heart will experience such troubles that not only will you think yourself far from the state of Grace I promised you, but you will think that you have fallen from the one you already attained."

On the first of May, 1288, Margaret, preferring to obey God rather than man, finally hid herself from the inquisitive and sometimes spiteful crowd. Against the advice of the Friars Minor she shut herself up in that little retreat on Mount Sant-Egidio near the ruined church of St. Basil (or of St. Giles) built much earlier by the Camaldolese monks. The people of Arezzo had destroyed it in 1258. The Commune of Cortona allowed Margaret to occupy it provided she got the consent of Guglielmo Ubertini, Bishop of Arezzo. This prelate, a sort of little *condottiere*, neglected to reply to the saint, and was killed meanwhile in the battle of Campaldino. After two years of waiting, his successor Hildebrand at last consented. But the Friars only allowed Friar Giunta Bevegnati to visit Margaret once a week.

Don Badia Ventura, chaplain of the restored church, replaced him as Margaret's confessor. Following an order of

Christ's, Margaret had an altar built in the cell on which her God bestowed a special blessing: "For love of you, new light, I bless the cell where you live hidden for love of me."

In 1288 a new Warden was elected by the Chapter of Siena, John of Castiglione. Without being a declared enemy of Margaret, he resolved to place her under observation. Friar Bevegnati had fallen a victim to the current doubts concerning her and she had the distress of seeing her spiritual father join the ranks of the enemy. He himself does not deny this, but piously puts the blame on the devil. "The serpent who is always setting his snares did not forget the threat he had made to me, for his role is to tempt the elect. He strove to turn my spirit against this daughter of God whom I did in any case consider indiscreet in embracing such an austere way of life. He suggested to me that I should cease my visits to her for a time." (Did he then abandon Margaret of his own accord, and not by order of the Warden?) "Her gentleness never wavered, and she never ceased to pray for me."

It does certainly seem as if the good Friar followed with the stream. We must remember that Margaret's excesses confounded human wisdom. "Seeing the sad state of her emaciated body, crippled with fasting, tears, disciplines, hair-shirts, and every kind of infirmity, I feared lest it should fail at any moment." We can see from this how terribly perplexed her confessor must have been.

The Friars' distrust increased without ever turning into an active hostility. John of Castiglione died in 1290 and was succeeded by Friar Philip who immediately took radical measures. He banished Friar Bevegnati to the convent of Siena where he remained for seven years. And so Margaret entered the dark night of which she had been forewarned. Her Franciscan soul, whose only link with the world lay in its attachment to the Order, was not only suspect but cast

out, officially branded with the mark of distrust by the very people to whom Christ had confided it. One of the women who had taken most care of her (perhaps one of the Moscardi) went as far as to accuse her of levity. Our Lord told her not to speak to anyone about this woman's scorn.

There exists a Christian drama of obedience. It is undeniable that a martyr's contention that it is better to obey God than man opens the door to every sort of aberration from good sense. For if it is true that God sometimes speaks directly to a soul, that soul is the only witness of what is said, and its good faith does not safeguard it from the danger of illusions. "Tell your confessor from me," said Christ to Margaret, "that he must not turn you away from that cell near the rock; and tell him to write to Friar John not to take advantage of this change in order to withdraw you from his care." But in the very moment that Friar Giunta received these instructions from Margaret, he was assailed by doubts concerning the interior message which she was repeating. If she felt some bitterness about this, none is apparent in the letter she wrote him when he went to the Convent at Siena, and which he has preserved for us.

When Margaret was abandoned by man, she immediately thought herself abandoned also by God—for the imitation of Christ had to be pressed as far as the cry of the Crucified Son: "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?"

But Friar Giunta does not linger over this night that Margaret traversed, where God was reached by means of a total denudation, a deprivation of everything—even of the holy joys which came from Him and yet were not Himself. For God is never so close to a soul as when He pretends to have deserted it, never so near to absorbing it, transforming it into His own likeness, as when He has stripped it bare and emptied it of itself.

The revolt of nature against such a merciless Master,

against a God "who so loves bodies that suffer," to quote Pascal's apostrophe, had to be envisaged by Margaret, and conquered by her. Like all her brothers and sisters in sanctity, she experienced the devil—not as we experience him, by his suggestions only (so that he can hardly be distinguished from our vices)—but substantially: she saw him face to face, and he was never so formidable as when he showed her pity. "O, you most unfortunate of all women under the sky!" he whispered. "What is your master? Who is it you are forcing yourself to follow with such faith and courage? On whom have you fastened your heart with such a strange and exclusive love? He whom you love, this Jesus whom you seek after night and day and for whom you crucify your flesh by all sorts of tortures, is a cruel idol; he only gives his love to those who abandon everything and destroy themselves."

Cruel: the terrible word had been uttered—probably in one of those moments in the night when the soul sees God from the darkness of Faith alone, when it believes in God's love with all the strength of its will but is unable to feel it sensibly. Margaret, more than any other creature, had brought about the death of all the things that please the senses; but she probably had much to learn about this second death—the death of spiritual comfort, of inner consolation. She was not altogether a stranger to the evil denounced by John of the Cross when he talked about souls who seek God but who "abhor . . . barrenness and aridity, inner difficulties and poverty of spirit, demanding always the sweetest communications of God, spiritual satiation, things which cannot be called self-abnegation nor deprivation of the spirit but must be termed spiritual greed."

True, Margaret had mortified in herself this sublime sensuality of the saints; but, being bowed down with remorse about her youth, she still sought the delights of

sensible love, not only for their joy but because she regarded them as a sign of her re-entry into Grace. For her humility never allowed her to be convinced on this point. Her immense love demanded not consolation, but certitude: it needed reassurance. This was obviously the reason why God's silence was such an atrocious ordeal for her anxious soul. "What if He had changed His mind? Suppose the weight of my sins carried the day finally?"

The memory of the penances inflicted on herself over so many years was of no help to her at such times because the Enemy used them against her: "You must know," he whispered, "that you will never receive God's pardon for your sins, the pardon which you ceaselessly demand, because you have killed yourself by your abstinences . . ."

St. John of the Cross specified that during the night of the soul which follows the night of the senses, the soul's greatest torment is to think that God hates it. Margaret ceased to be aware of the work that love had accomplished in her; she ceased to feel herself as clay in the potter's hands. In her spiritual abandonment, this aridity on the part of God gave her none of the support which her fellow-creatures had offered her through all those years of her physical destitution. Entirely cut off from God and the world, a creature cast out on all sides, she certainly had no presentiment that the moment of supreme joy was approaching. Indeed, the memory of past felicities pierced her heart.

And even if Friar Giunta Bevegnati had not abandoned her, it is doubtful whether he would have given her any more help than Don Badia who replaced him. What could they understand of this strange misery? The soul in this state, according to St. John of the Cross, "is like a man in a dark prison whose hands and feet are tied. He can neither move, nor see, nor receive any alleviation. In the same way the soul groans in chains, in darkness, immobile, without

help, until the spirit is softened, humiliated, purified, until it is so fine, so simple, that it can almost become one spirit with the spirit of God—in accordance with the measure and degree of the union of love to which mercy desires to lift it.”

Step by step Margaret followed this exhausting itinerary, which St. John of the Cross was to describe two centuries later. “Souls suffering from such an affliction love God so much that they would give a thousand lives for Him. But this great love does not prevent them from imagining that they are not loved, from seeing nothing in themselves that is worthy of love, and from esteeming themselves so wretched as to merit the hate of God and the horror of His creatures . . .” (*The Dark Night*,⁴ II, 7.)

Christ's Pity for His Crucified Servant

ONE IS SOMETIMES TEMPTED to think that Christ could not bear to watch His servant suffer, and at those times He let drop for her a saving word: "Rest assured, you will not be disappointed; you are inscribed in the book of life."

One dreams of the sublime litanies one could compose in Margaret's honour, made with the ravishing names given her by her Lord and her God—the God whom she madly believed did not love her. "Daughter of gall—daughter whose charity is the subject of whispering—daughter of tribulation, of glory and grandeur—daughter of perfect faith—star—my chosen one, my companion, my sister—Margaret, my martyr—living sanctuary of my Grace—white rose for innocence, red rose for love . . ."

Her tormenting God never left her without consolation. In the darkest moments of her trials, He suddenly becalmed her. Christ, slumbering in the stern, had awakened.

The hour at last came when Our Lord wanted to eradicate for good and all the terrible doubts of a penitent who thought herself unworthy of pardon. How many other saints have tasted the grace of being absolved by Christ Himself? Margaret experienced the unimaginable joy of hearing the same words addressed to her that had been addressed to the paralytic and the man born blind—"Thy sins are forgiven thee"—and by the same mouth. A hand was laid on her forehead, the same hand which had touched the prostitute and the publican.

"Confess, my daughter, to your Lord Jesus." This invitation came to her on a day when all the sins of her past life were present in her mind and when she was sorrowful to the point of fainting. She implored her Judge not to spare her and hoped only that death would put an end to her atrocious and inconsolable suffering. But He laid His hand on her; her who had obeyed to the letter His order to follow Him with nothing but the Cross. And suddenly she was released. "I absolve you, my daughter, in the name of the Father, in My name, and in the name of the Holy Ghost, of all the sins of thought, word and deed which you have committed up to this day."

Perhaps it was not the Master's wish that Margaret should have endured such agony, since He put Himself out thus to deliver her. But the liberty of the soul operates for good or evil, for an excess of penitence as much as for an excess of guilty pleasures. Margaret resisted the grace of appeasement which Christ lavished on her. To what lengths would He not go in His tenderness for His martyred penitent? The winds and the sea obey Him precisely because they have no soul. Where there is a soul, however holy it may be, the Infinite Being is up against a freedom which disarms Him. Margaret did not want the great calm which had subdued the waves on the lake of Tiberias. She was a bird of the storm and the foam. She felt her love only when on the extreme verge of despair.

The happiness of being forgiven, of having the certainty of forgiveness—instead of just the hope, as ordinary penitents have—is a happiness that can be measured only by a sinner and a Christian; that is to say, it is necessary to have a knowledge of sin. The pure can possess this knowledge if they love Christ, but the debased can never possess it because they have lost the power to discern evil. It is already a great grace to feel oneself stained, and rejected by God.

A sense of sin not only awakens us to the gravity of our faults, but it increases in us in proportion as we purify ourselves. Anyone who knows he is a sinner is already converted. Who has not heard the phrase: "I have never done anything wrong"—and the person who says it is probably a thief, an adulterer, or a sodomite. At the first sign of shame, or even less, at the first misgiving, at the first little stab that self-examination can awaken—we know that God is near.

If Christ demanded that Margaret should love and suffer under the public gaze, it was because the vocation of saints is to make Christians see to what lengths horror of self can go in a soul which is vowed to perfection. But to feel this horror one must first love. God alone can bestow those movements of the heart which are always accompanied by repentance. The more love purifies itself, the more our sorrow increases at having offended the God whom we love.

The grace of seeing oneself as one is, the grace of clear-sightedness, is not obtained by human means. A life which is honest and even devout according to the world can be wretched in the eyes of the Infinite Purity. Christ revealed this to Margaret of Cortona in words which have a meaning for us all, all of us Christians who belong to the privileged classes.

The Eternal Bourgeoise

A DEVOUT WOMAN OF THE BEST SOCIETY in Cortona showed such a devotion for Margaret that the saint prayed continually for this benefactress. One day Christ spoke to Margaret about this soul. "My daughter," He said, "you must tell your confessor the shortcomings of her for whom you pray so often. I shall show them to you in order, so that your confessor can tell her, to her great profit." Here follows an examination of conscience, terrifying in its detail, which Christ Himself proposes to many blameless people who confess trifles every week and congratulate themselves on their freedom from sin.

"Tell him that she, who is so devoted to you for love of Me, had a heart of only doubtful integrity before her marriage. She should confess having desired the man who is now her husband too passionately and having sought him with immoderate desire. She should confess the false honesty of her looks, words, gestures.

"She should confess that at a time when a misfortune befell one of her relations she bore false witness and contributed very much to the injustice of the judge's sentence, and that she minded the defamation of character incurred by the accused less than the loss of money.

"She must confess the offence she did me in going to the *Podestà* to hear herself proclaimed more beautiful than all her companions"—so already there were beauty queens!

"She must admit that often she secretly accused servants to their masters, hoping to gain their friendship by this

zealous indiscretion. This zeal to meddle in their affairs was nothing but hypocrisy, since she had no real affection for them or anyone else; with the exception of her husband and children whom she loved to excess.

"She must confess the inordinate attraction that the delicacies of the table have for her.

"She must bewail her hardness of heart towards the poor.

"She must admit the use she has made of ill-acquired goods, remembering everything that she spent. How much of her husband's money has she not taken?—money deriving from frauds, money gained by violence, money won at games.

"As the mother of a family she was responsible for the expenditure of the household; she should recall how much of this was useless or superfluous, how much of it was made with money dishonestly acquired." What rich *dévôte* ever asks herself questions about "those things which make one tremble," which Bourdaloue denounced as lying at the root of all great fortunes?

"She should confess the jealousy she harboured against her parents when they did not espouse her husband's quarrels, the proud domination which she exercised in her husband's family—she who would never have allowed her sister-in-law to behave like that in her own. She should confess her mean treatment of her husband's wards, whom she should have cherished like the poor. She should remember all the insults she has thrown at the people of her house at one time or another, and the vanity with which she adorns her body.

"She should confess her slanders and rash judgment of her neighbours whose qualities she despised and disparaged, recalling the defects which she knew, stirring up talk about their weaknesses, concealing their good points and finding

ways of blaming them for faults they had never committed.

"She should confess the bitter tales told about people behind their backs, and the flattery of others whom she meets face to face.

"She should admit her thirst for honours and praise, her desire to seem richer than others, her jealousy at the thought that others could be superior to her in wealth and beauty, her prodigality in church in the presence of other women.

"In spite of what I have done for her, I have not been able to bind myself to her, and if she has sometimes served me it has been for fear and not for love.

"Although she is free from the vice of impurity, she has nevertheless defiled the marriage bed. She was not repelled at finding herself among those who offend me in their flesh; she who was filled with the vices of the spirit.

"She should confess her readiness to blame others for their ill-acquired goods, their lands, the luxury of their clothes and perfumes, while she herself enjoys the pleasures of good living and distributes her alms so ostentatiously.

"She should confess her indiscretions about her servants, and her rash judgments of the poor; the way she despises their requests, their tears, and also their pleasures, their games, their food and their drink." (This last trait is admirable!)

"She denies herself nothing either in the quantity or the quality of her dress; yet she gives no thought to clothing the nakedness, or assuaging the hunger, of the poor.

"She should confess to having usurped the name which belongs to my Mother when she had herself called Sovereign—she who would laugh at others when they took the same name.

"Although she cultivated the society of the most beautiful and best-dressed people, she always considered herself their superior.

"She should admit the weaknesses of her spirit which lead her to exaggerate her troubles and to see them always as greater than those of other people, while she remains cold and indifferent to other people's misfortunes.

"She should confess her harshness towards her servants, to whom she never gave a moment's rest even when they had been working hard and even when they were ill. Instead of showing them the thoughtfulness which was their due, she insulted them and accused them of greed and negligence. She looked after herself very carefully, but she would talk when she ought to have been silent, and would be silent when she ought to have spoken.

"She should confess having avoided deformed people . . . but notwithstanding all these defects she must have faith in my mercy. She should go to her confessor without delay. In the meantime, my daughter Margaret, let me tell you that this woman, whom you recommend so insistently to my mercy, will not co-operate fully with these graces."

Doubts concerning this Diatribe

THIS DETAILED DIATRIBE against the woman of all times and all countries goes on, attentive to trivial as well as important things, to molehills as well as mountains. But the human interest which it excites in us is overlaid by a certain uneasiness: it is Christ who is speaking, it is from Christ's mouth that Margaret heard this diatribe—or thought she heard it.

But we know how Jesus spoke to sinners when He was on earth; and we know the kind of words He used when He spoke about sinners. Each of His words, transmitted for us with a fervent care, has a ring all its own. Our ear is sensitive to the slightest jar, so well do we, His sheep, know His adored voice.

When He is speaking not to public sinners like the Samaritan woman or the woman taken in adultery or Mary Magdalen, but even to the paralytic or the man born blind, what secret of their daily lives could His divine eyes not have fathomed as they lay prostrate at His feet! But no. He never loses Himself in the labyrinth of a human life. Whoever it is He sees, Jesus invariably says: "Thy sins are forgiven thee!" and everything is swept away, scattered, obliterated—the triviality and the crime, the mountain and the molehill; and that is why no one should be shocked by the apparent indifference of the Catholic confessor to the sins his penitent whispers across the grille, for the unfathomable mercy which he represents swallows all this filth.

So now we begin to doubt, like the good Friar Giunta Bevegnati himself. We, too, doubt Margaret. How could she have believed that Jesus was the author of this over-detailed diatribe from a poor woman unconsciously exasperated by her benefactress? Unknown to herself, Margaret was registering from day to day all the things that shocked and irritated her in this important lady, a lady at once devout and pharisaical. The saint gives place to the woman here. A woman observes another woman and avoids the sin against charity by fathering her pitiless examination on to God.

But if Margaret was her own dupe on that occasion, what guarantee is there that she was not always so, that it was not always herself talking to herself? Uneasiness on this point has been gnawing at me throughout this meditation on a saintly life, and I am no longer able to suppress it. Besides, is it a duty to suppress it? Ought a Christian to be by definition a biassed person? The Enemy desires this doubt to be born in us.

The Christian knows what is truth. And he not only breathes and moves in the truth, but he knows its name, its face. It has been revealed to him that truth is Someone who came into the world, who was made manifest to the world. By a strange sequence, it happens that the certainty he has of possessing truth in its very essence, of drinking at its source, renders him less scrupulous with regard to partial verities. It does not matter very much if such and such a story is a legend so long as what it illustrates is true. If some of us yield without examination to ill-founded beliefs it is because we are dealing with legends organised *within the framework* of truth. Thus some of the followers of Our Lord, who said to Pilate: "For this was I born, and for this came I into the world; that I should give testimony to the truth. Everyone that is of the truth, heareth my voice," seem less sensi-

tive than their adversaries to intellectual honesty. Without meaning any harm, they yield to the complacency of certitude.

People of this kind persuade themselves that the first theological virtue, Faith, never shows itself more surely than in an unreflecting adherence to all phenomena proposed to them as supernatural. And at the same time they readily suspect the priest or layman who, outside the truths of the Faith, is careful to admit nothing without examination. It is, in fact, a faith which swallows everything, the good and the bad. But is it meritorious in the eyes of the God of Truth to believe that such and such an apparition really happened if it is based on a half-concerted illusion of a handful of children? Nor does anything oblige us to shut our eyes to the different nature of Christ's words as reported by an ecstatic and as transmitted by the Evangelists. "Jesus Christ," wrote Pascal, "said great things so simply that it seems as if He did not think of them, and nevertheless so lucidly that one sees very well what He thought of them. This clarity combined with this naïvety is admirable." The diatribe against the woman is admirable, too, but not naïve, and because of that one sees that those words, at any rate, are human. But there remain many others embedded in the thick prose of Friar Giunta (or his translator) which we have no difficulty in believing divine.

In chapter 25 of the *Story of my life*, Saint Teresa of Avila assures us that interior messages bring with them their own certainty. This does not prevent her, on the persuasion of the theologians who studied her case, from thinking, or forcing herself to think, for two years, that the words which ravished her came from the devil. It does not seem to have occurred to those wise men that the words could have come neither from the devil nor God, but from Teresa herself.

Moreover, in the case of our Margaret it is essential not to

lose sight of the state to which her penances had reduced her. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross put those whom they directed on their guard against an abuse of disciplines and penances; an exhausted person is in no condition to withstand illusion or mirage or nightmare, and this is one of the principal reasons why St. John and St. Teresa gave their warnings.

Margaret and the Devil

MARGARET SAW SERPENTS which she took to be bad angels. "It entered her cell in the shape of a serpent, terrifying in form and flashing poisonous looks at her; hissing horribly, his head held high, it plunged towards her with dizzy speed . . . Its length was such that after an hour had passed she could barely see the end of it. Its malice was so black that during this time the eyes of God's servant were so blinded that she could no longer distinguish anything. Not content with appearing thus while she was at prayer, it sometimes came on to her bed, or hung along the wall, thence descending to the ground; sometimes, either when entering or going away, it opened its jaws and hissed horribly, as if in imitation of the stamping and roaring of a crowd."

Let it be clearly understood; we are of those who believe that evil, too, is Someone (someone who is multiple and whose name is 'legion'). No other article of faith is so disconcerting as this; that power over the human creature should be given to an invisible enemy although the creature is disarmed and does not even know that Satan exists. A disconcerting truth, yes, but one which corresponds with certain experiences and is the key to certain destinies.

I doubt whether it has ever been possible to produce experimental proof of the presence of Satan in a life. One must believe in the existence of the devil before being able to recognise him. But then how easily do we sense his presence!

Not by any means in all sinners. Many great sinners have nothing diabolical about them. It is one thing to be under the empire of the devil, as we all are when we have fallen from the state of Grace, and it is quite another to be inhabited by him, invested by him, literally possessed by him.

This sort of possession does not show itself by convulsions and gnashing of teeth. It is more likely to betray itself by great bodily vigour, perhaps an angelic expression on the face, a great sharpening of the intelligence, and above all by a peculiar and constant happiness. Instead of injuring a man and hampering his success, it even helps him to his fame. However hideous his vice, he indulges it easily and seems to enjoy, in a marvellous abundance, the opportunity of doing so without any cost to himself. That which dishonours others serves him. There is no need for him to pay his debt in this life, for he has all eternity in which to make remittance.

At the root of these destinies one nearly always finds a lucid choice, a refusal of God, a deliberate renouncement of His Grace—so deliberate indeed that a man can usually remember the period of his life when he made the choice, and sometimes even the very day and hour in which he said: No.

In a man thus lost, the elements of the saint that he might have been are nearly always there, and it is surprising to discover in him—in the paroxysm of his most atrocious corruption—a faith in eternity, a knowledge of the invisible world, an almost physical experience of supernatural life not usually apprehended here below. These creatures (unlike the majority of believers) are convinced that all the teaching of the Church is true; indeed, they are laying their finger on the most terrifying of all her truths; yet this avails them nothing because they lack love. They go forward to the abyss, their eyes wide open.

No! No one who has seen the devil in a man could ever

believe that he takes the form of a dragon or a serpent. Nothing resembles him less than these monsters born of our sorrowing saint's imagination. "The apostle calls devils princes because of the excellence of their nature," as the catechism of the Council of Trent expresses it.

It is not that Margaret did not have dealings with the devil and that we do not recognise him at her side; but the canny master-tormentor was not someone disguised as a sea serpent. He knew such obvious tricks would avail him nothing to forge a way into this woman who had been crucified with Christ. He explored the ground, searched for the weak spot, and it is marvellous to observe how he left no stone unturned.

André Gide, commenting on Dostoievsky's conception of the devil, says that the Russian novelist places him "not in the basest part of man but in the loftiest, in the region of the intellect, of the brain. The great temptations which the Evil One presents us with are, according to Dostoievsky, intellectual temptations, *questionings*."

It was certainly so with Margaret. First of all, the devil played on her uncertainty about the origin of the words which enraptured her; and this temptation she was unable to master. "It is neither Christ nor an angel who grants you the consolations you think you owe to Christ, but it is myself." He always suggested to Margaret the thoughts which were already, in germ, within her. He rubbed salt in her open wounds when he whispered: "Don't you realise that you are damned for not having responded to the immense benefits which you have received from God, benefits which He will hold against you one day, and you will pay for your contempt of them by eternal damnation?"

One can hardly doubt that the Enemy would have attacked Margaret through her son. Friar Bevegnati records nothing on this subject, but it was her most vulnerable spot.

"What have you done to that soul born of your desire and sacrificed on the altar of your spurious sanctity? What have you done with the little creature on whom you inflicted life by your criminal delights, only to condemn him to a martyred childhood? He inherited power and strength from his young father, a taste for noble pleasures; and you have made of him a shuffling novice. You have cheated him of his heritage, manly fights, embraces, slumber against an adored breast; but you have not opened paradise for him. These souls that stray on the borderline of Heaven and earth, cast out by the world and by God, they are my special portion, they are gifts to me. Even before he was born you had in a way consecrated that child to me; your child. Don't you consider that his everlasting suffering, his eternal despair, are a very dear price to pay for your eternity of happiness?"

It must have been at such a moment as this that Margaret, prostrate, and with her face pressed against the ground, heard the words of liberation: "Your son shall be saved." Yes, saved with all that was lost; for "the Son of God is come to find and save that which was lost."

But the Enemy, momentarily rebuffed, crept back again, approaching her little by little until his breath burnt her. He knew where to hit, he knew the misgivings which gnaw at a holy soul in spite of herself. For the way of perfection runs alongside an abyss of despair: despair which, until the bitter end, remains a temptation for those who have not retreated before Christ's command: "Be ye perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect." "You must know," whispered the devil, "that you will never receive God's pardon for your sins which you ceaselessly beg because you have killed yourself by your abstinences."

Even when the fallen angel unwittingly betrayed his hatred of Christ, even when he breathed forth this hatred in the furious adjuration already quoted: "He whom you

love, this Jesus whom you seek night and day and for whom you crucify your flesh with all kinds of tortures is such a cruel idol that He gives His love only to those who destroy themselves for Him"—even when this outburst unmasked him and showed him for what he was, he knew that he had awakened in Margaret a secret thought hardly known to herself, a doubt, an anguish.

For Margaret still had a mirror. Or perhaps she could see her reflection in the window pane. What was this!—this withered creature dressed in rags or wrapped in matting, with shaven head and ravaged face, with a body deformed by self-inflicted infirmities: was this the state to which Christ reduces His loved ones?

Her immense love gave no time for this thought to flower, but smothered it before she was aware of it. But the tempter would quite certainly have cast around again to discover a safer and surer way of reaching her. He would have stopped denouncing a merciless Christ, and would have argued instead that the Son of Man could not desire the degradation of His creatures, that Margaret was mistaken, that every page of the Gospel and every word of Christ went to show that she was the victim of an irreparable error. The people who followed Him in Galilee did not smear their faces with soot. On the contrary, He told them to anoint their heads, especially when they were fasting. No self-imposed infirmity crossed His path; indeed, those who clustered around Him were there on purpose to be healed. His disciples sat at table with the rich and with sinners.

"Yes," Margaret must have answered, "because they had the Bridegroom with them; but when the Bridegroom left them, then they began to suffer. And I have chosen my own moment for joining those who followed Him. Not the moment when the crowd waved branches and shouted Hosanna. No, I attached myself to the little flock that

followed Him only when He had left the room where He ate the last supper, crossed the Cedron, and gone into the Garden. I entered into His agony with Him. I lived through the last hours of His mortal life, second by second, between the two agonies—that of the sweat of blood in the darkness witnessed only by the Father and the angels, and that which He suffered on the Cross under the eye of man. These two agonies form the boundaries of my life. I come and go from one to the other: I leave the olive tree only to kiss the wood covered with blood. Jesus does not demand this overpowering service of all His creatures, nor even of a large number. Each vocation is unique. I am not an example for the flock.”

Nothing is more anti-Christian than the maxim adopted many centuries after Margaret by some of the best of men: “Act as if your action could serve as a universal rule.” For nothing is more individual than the path that is revealed to each of us, bound though we all are to imitate Christ. Jesus carries within Him every vocation since He has suffered every expiation. Every man goes his own way, bearing his own burden, and this way and that burden are distinct from all others; and yet all are interfused with Our Lord’s Cross. These numberless individual ways all lead to the same agony, the same death, the same resurrection.

The poor penitent of Cortona, asleep now for seven centuries, and who to-day would pass for mad, is relieved of her office from year to year. To-day it is another woman lost in the crowd or confined in another cloister who has taken her place. We see her crouching behind a pillar in our parish church, the new Margaret of Cortona, and we do not recognise her.

Words of God or of the Devil

MARGARET'S CONSTANT FEAR that it was perhaps the devil who was speaking to her and not Our Lord did not prevent her from sometimes interpreting a message from the darkness as a message from Christ. One of the messages which Friar Giunta records for us certainly makes us doubt its origin. After a most loving prayer, in which Margaret implored the divine flame "never to grow cold" she received this strange reproach: "Margaret, you think only of yourself."

A strange reproach indeed, considering that this holy girl was born at the dawn of Franciscan charity and practised it to the point of madness. It was not enough for her to "serve the poor in poverty"—as Pascal puts it—but she wrenched herself from her contemplation in order to found and support what are to-day called "charities." She was the foundress of hospitals, of the House of Mercy in Cortona which seems to have been the first hospital of that quality in Italy. In 1286 she organised the Order of Our Lady of Mercy for the care of the sick. She grouped young women tertiaries under the name of 'little poor ones' (*Poverelle*). Like the majority of the great ecstatic saints, she achieved this miracle: God was passionately contemplated in every second of a life devoured by active charity.

She even had to take part in the politics of Cortona. It was not of herself that she was thinking when, through the intermediary of Friar Giunta, she forced herself to arbitrate

between conflicting factions, to appease the anger of certain important families such as the Rossi or the Rechabeni. The humble penitent also had to deal with the Bishop of Arezzo, chief of the armies before which Cortona trembled, whom she pacified at first but who perished ignominiously on the field of battle. The Emperor, the Pope and the King of Sicily seem, if not to have acted on her intervention, at least to have received her advice with respect. She was obliged to take part in the Franciscan squabbles. "You think only of yourself!" and yet "others" devoured her life.

In all truth the poor girl thought only of her God. For her the only conceivable politics were the Crusades, the deliverance of the Holy Sepulchre: it was always God. To reach Him she naturally had to tread the path of her own story, her sinful youth, her humiliations, her penance. She sought herself in Him only to bury herself there. She hated herself with a fierce hatred and her only delight was to flee from herself, to be consumed in that devouring fire to which the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews compares our God. It is remarkable that our bewildered saint, contrary to her custom, made no reply to this reproach of Jesus.

But this message, which surprises us coming from Our Lord, is pregnant with meaning if we believe that it was the Old Enemy who whispered it in Margaret's ear! "You think only of yourself." Here is a theme which Satan will never tire of in launching his attack against sanctity. "What importance you give yourselves, you poor ephemeral creatures!" he ceaselessly repeats to those who seek perfection. "What a price you put on your least gesture, your least thought! There is nothing like your conceit! You make your body and soul the centre of creation. You never cease bemoaning your sins, as if the fate of humanity hung on your physical reflexes. It seems to you quite easy to interest the Infinite Being in all this, to worry Him about it

as if only you and He existed in the world. You extinguish the universe for the sake of this illusory tête-à-tête. You inflict horrible excesses on yourself in the hope that God will notice your extravagances. The worst prostitute humiliates herself better than you do, since her miserable body means nothing to her. She wouldn't honour it by beating or lacerating it: its ignominy and shame are enough."

When the Eternal Liar gives vent to this sort of outburst he probably does not think that he is lying: for this is exactly how the saints appear to this exile from love, and this is how they appear to a world for which Christ refused to pray.

Can it be said that Margaret, who thought only of her God, thought also of her neighbour? The truth is that even had she wanted to forget others, they would not have allowed her to. From the time of her first ecstasies right until her death, the crowd never ceased to beat upon her cell. This torture of not being able to be alone with Him whom she loved oppressed her till the end. Right until the end she bore the burden of others, not only of the sick and of the poor from the hospital. "One day, during her illness, as she was sitting on her straw mat dressed for the winter in a simple tunic which covered her hair-shirt, she was told by Our Lord that in a village several miles away there lived a poor wretch burdened with a family, incapable of earning his living and lacking food and clothes. She was ordered to send him her tunic which she had by the charity of others. She joyfully stripped herself of it . . ." Friar Bevegnati also tells us: "Our Lord had filled her with such a boundless charity that crowds came to her from the furthest parts of the neighbouring provinces."

At the same time her love for God sometimes prompted her to an answer which betrayed a human egoism or even the influence of the devil. One day Friar Rinaldo, the Guardian of Arezzo, said to her: "Supposing that, at this

moment, when you are enjoying such great consolation in Christ, a revelation were to tell you that a soul charged with crime will be condemned to Hell unless you succeed in bringing it to penance, and you were given this alternative: either to lose the ineffable happiness which you enjoy at this moment and thus save that soul, praying for it until the hour of Terce, or to leave that soul to be condemned to eternal fire, because you do not choose to be deprived of the sweetness of your consolations: which would you choose?" Margaret answered; "I tremble to commit myself. If on the one hand I renounce my joy with Our Lord, I shall fall into the bitterness of a new death. If, on the other hand, I abandon this soul, I should be afraid of offending the Creator. Allow me, therefore, to leave your question unanswered." What an astonishing reply! She hesitated to renounce the delights of her colloquy with Christ for the sake of saving a soul! She dared to measure the eternal fate of a soul against a contemplation to which she could easily have returned once her mission with the lost creature was accomplished.

Strangest of all is that the next day the Good Shepherd, who gives His life for His sheep and abandons the whole flock to run after the one that is lost, congratulated Margaret on not having answered the case of conscience put to her by the Guardian of Arezzo, and on having hesitated to choose between the salvation of a man and the spiritual sweets with which she had been showered. Surely this would have been the moment for Our Lord to reproach her with the words which He addressed to her on another occasion: "You think only of steeping yourself in my gifts, without giving a thought to the creatures I have redeemed with my blood."

Margaret before the Sacrament

IT IS SURPRISING THAT in the Catholic Church—which is of all Christian denominations the most dogmatic, the most hierarchical, and in whose theology reason plays such a large part—it is surprising that here the folly of the Cross should be allowed so large an emphasis.

One would have thought that the personal religion deriving from Luther and Calvin, would be more likely to foster experiences of that kind. But does there exist among Protestants a Margaret of Cortona, an Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Siena, a Teresa of Avila, a John of the Cross? Is it because they deny the Communion of Saints and the reversibility of merits, is it because the very idea of "merits" is unknown to them, is it because they do not admit an mediation in their approach to God, that their mystics remain so obscure?

Some of these Protestant mystics (according to a note in *St. John of the Cross* by Jean Baruzi), Poirer, Dutoit, the Comte de Fleischbein, Saint Georges de Marsay, submitted through Madame Guyon, to the influence of St. John of the Cross. Even so, it remains true that Protestant fideism is very rarely mystical.

Yet no one could say that the Catholic Church smiles at the excesses of contemplatives. She distrusts them, rather, and, in short, gives the impression that she prefers them dead than alive. Everything seems to show that the mystical stream, when canalised by Rome, gains in depth and power

It would therefore be incorrect to agree with Bergson that official religion is nothing but a vulgarisation of the true religion, which is mysticism. Official religion seems rather to be its frame, its mould; it gives it its shape, its contours, and regulates its current between banks which prevent it from overflowing.

But most important of all for the Catholic is the fact that *God is still speaking*, that revelation still continues by and through the Church. Whereas for the Protestants everything is closed because everything is in the Bible, and it only remains for each to interpret it according to his inspiration, for us Catholics our adventure with God goes on; the story is not finished. It is so little finished that Christ sacrifices Himself again and again at the Sacrifice of the Mass. His blood will flow every morning until the last dawn of the world; His living body will be given as food, and His pardon will release from sin so long as there are sinners upon earth.

Here is what the simple life of our Margaret shows us: that one of the Catholic dogmas acts as a prodigious ferment, no doubt the ferment essential to this "passional" piety—the dogma which gives to the contemplative his contemplated God, which gives Him to him whole and entire, body, blood, soul and divinity. In losing faith in the Real Presence, Calvinism lost the marvel around which mystical experience is crystallised. Faith in the Real Presence, the certainty every morning of holding in one's heart, against one's breast, the Son of Man, the Son of God, miraculously abolishes the distance between creature and Creator. This short cut leads predestined souls straight to ecstasy and union.

This is particularly true of holy women whose vocations are bound up with the humanity of Christ, but would be more open to discussion for those who, over and above the

Second Person, seek the Father and the abyss of the Trinity. Could we not say that Mass and Communion for a John of the Cross was the starting-point of his ascension whereas for our Margaret the Host was always at the very centre of her penance and her joy?

Returning one day from communion she cried: "This morning my soul is greater than the world because it possesses You, You whom heaven and earth do not contain."

The approach of the Host so ravished her that she besought her confessor not to give it to her until after the conventual Mass, because her humility feared to expose to the congregation the secret of such superhuman joy. And she restrained herself from the temptation which she felt. Christ Himself had to command her not to deprive herself of communion on Fridays. "Do you not know that my heart chose that day to unite itself with the world? Is it not the day when I clasped the human race to my breast, as a father would his only son?"

The unworthiness of priests depressed her. In an ecstasy she saw one of them raising the Infant God over the chalice and his uplifted hands were atrociously black. She cried: "Mercy, mercy, mercy for those soiled hands!" The priest was called Angiolo; she summoned him to her and upbraided him with a violence which she afterwards regretted.

But she did not consider herself, either, as worthy to receive her God. "Why is it, my Saviour, that You compel me to receive You so often?" One day, as she returned from communion, she was suddenly suffused with so deep a peace that she could not stifle a cry. Jesus asked her if her soul was thoroughly sated, and she answered: "The joys that I taste at this moment are so great that even in heaven I think I will ask for them to be increased, so insatiable is my thirst to possess You. O bread of life! O adorable bread,

with what power, with what strength You fill me! With what joy You inundate Your servant who is so weak and wretched!" Christ then asked her: "Why, then, do you not receive Me every day?"

But this invitation was addressed only to Margaret. There are other threatening words intended for the lay and religious who communicate without sufficient purification. "Woe to those souls!" Margaret heard this malediction. "But you," He added, "you are my slave through your past sins, my servant through your present penances, my sister through your state of Grace, my daughter by the pledge you have received of my eternal glory."

Although He urged her daily not to falter before the Host, He approved of a young monk for spacing his communions so as not to succumb to the indifference born of habit. In fact, if the history of our saint written by Friar Giunta Bevegnati had fallen into the hands of Arnauld and Pascal, it would have provided these adversaries of frequent communion with ample texts to strengthen them in their point of view.

On this point, as on so many others, the orthodox Christian follows a narrow path, a ridge between two gulfs. "If I remain distant from You I deprive myself of life," said the author of the *Imitation* to Christ. "If I approach You unworthily, I offend You."

Before communicating, the Christian, as St. Paul says, must prove himself; because we are ordered to partake of Our Lord's body as often as possible—but clothed in nuptial dress. And who is ever sure of being thus clothed? How can we be certain that even the sincerest of confessions has liquidated a past swarming with acts whose consequences are interconnected in spite of ourselves, and persist still? The crimes which we think are forgiven continue to bear fruit indefinitely. It is understandable that the Church

pushes little children to the altar rails not so much because of their present purity (if Doctor Freud is to be believed) as because they have no past, they do not drag after them the accumulated filth of a lifetime.

But we ageing sinners go round in a circle: we must be clothed in the nuptial dress so as to partake of Our Lord's body, but we must partake of it in order that the ill-fastened dress shall not slip from our shoulders. Be pure to communicate, but also communicate to become pure. Into what excesses might we not be led by this rashness of seeing in the Eucharist a remedy for the habits of old offenders! The *Provinciales* denounce it furiously. What can be done then? Shut our eyes, surrender ourselves to God's mercy with a confidence pushed to folly; and always keep before our minds St. Francis de Sales' phrase: "The past must be left to the mercy of God, the present to our fidelity, the future to divine providence."

All the same, if Margaret of Cortona, burnt-up, half-destroyed by penances, assured by interior messages and ecstasies of being Our Lord's beloved, trembled for her unworthiness before the Host, what shall sinners do who are half-washed of their stains and always ready to return to the mire? But each Christian life is unique and different; no example applies exactly to our particular drama. God's mercy espouses the vagaries of each conscience, takes the shape of each inadequacy. "I am talking to a God who knows everything," says the author of the *Imitation*, "who reads my innermost heart." It is on this divine—that is to say, total—knowledge of our own story that we must place our trust and not on the example of the saints, because then we might lose heart.

The saints know no respite. If their ascension is not achieved in a single flight, at least the spiritual impetus which carries them forward does not flag for a single day.

Ordinary Christians take advantage of God's silences to have a holiday. They detach themselves a little, repose in the shade of human affection, seek dissolution against a loving heart. They think they will be able to continue on their way when they feel like it. And it is true that our God is untiringly patient, waiting motionless, transfixed by three nails, at the crossroads of our highways: our God is the God who waits. But the faithless soul that comes back to his Father has lost the benefit of the first impulse. He has to start again from the beginning. Our spiritual life will have been an uninterrupted sequence of false starts. We detach ourselves when God is silent, that is to say at the very moment when true progress is beginning with aridity, when sensible devotion no longer deflects us from Him whom we seek. Our heart fails us at the very entrance to the naked desert of Faith, just as we are about to take the first step towards the unimaginable discovery.

Margaret's last survey of herself and the world

THE LAST NINE YEARS of Margaret's life, passed in her cell at Sant-Egidio, are lost in silence. Friar Giunta was no longer there to record her words. We cannot help thinking that, owing to this God-sent separation, she gathered truly divine words into her heart during this time; untranslatable words; words that the good Friar could no longer spoil or touch-up or pin-down (as he would pin dead butterflies on to cork). He could no longer ask her to ask Our Lord what He thought of the Franciscans and whether they ought to accept the offer of this or that chapel; and Our Lord was no longer supposed to whisper answers in which the Order was exalted above all other Orders.

What is so marvellous in the mystical adventure is the up-surgings of love which renders the canalisations of the Church certainly not useless but invisible. A Friar Filippo and a simple priest of the neighbouring church San Bagio, called Don Badia Ventura, had the power to take Christ to Margaret and to forgive her the sins which were already a thousand times forgiven. Then they withdrew and she was alone with her Creator in that cell, that hut. No more worry about telling to another things that are in their very essence untellable.

When she opened her eyes and looked out on to the world around her she saw at her feet, filling the landscape, the country of her childhood, of her sin, of her guilty passion, of her repentance, of her love. That way of the Cross to

which all life returns was there in front of her without her moving; she could accomplish it with her eyes. Laviano was quite near, whence she was cast out; and that hill in the distance was Montepulciano where the wretched love of her adolescence had taken root, where she had felt that obscure nagging hunger, the hunger which can lead a soul infinitely far from what it desires and link a whole destiny to the most changing thing in the world—a young male, cruel and caressing. And her eye knew how to discern the dark outline of the forest where he had been assassinated.

It must not be concluded from the fact that his name is never mentioned in the *Legend* written by Friar Giunta Bevegnati that Margaret had driven him from her heart and her thoughts; for sin creates a bond between people which it is not in their power to destroy. It was for this man, for him first and foremost, that she had wanted to go to the extremes of expiation. For him, the first of sinners in Margaret's eyes, but after him for all the rest of us: the frightful excesses of these penitent saints are caused by us, it is we ourselves who make them necessary. Our own impurity is at the root of that martyrdom which the true friends of Christ inflict upon themselves and which sometimes shocks us to the point of revulsion.

Perhaps then, looking out over that agricultural and human landscape—where the trees, the stones, the lost roads and the black outline of the forest came to new life under her gaze and in her memory but existed primarily in God—Margaret, half-awakened from ecstasy and still rapt in God, took the true measure of what she called her crimes. For years past, from the depths of her penitence, she had contemplated Our Lord's Cross from beneath, as she crouched on the ground, and she had steeped herself in the infinite price which she had had to pay for the least of her infidelities. But now, crucified as she was with Christ, it was

from the top of the gibbet that she beheld her errors; and perhaps she was tempted, certainly not to smile, but possibly to think that even in sin we are circumscribed and weak, and that there is an unimaginable disproportion between our sins and the Love which, because of them, desired to become incarnate and die.

But were her faults as slight as they seem to us? Even if we knew much more about them than Friar Giunta tells us, we should not be able to assess them. A sinner's life faces inwards and she is its only witness. The charming disorders of youth have their origin in an invisible vessel. From the moment that we see our bodies as temples of the Holy Ghost, as soon as Faith makes us realise the sacred character of this clay where the Trinity reposes, then we understand the mystery of sins of impurity—incomprehensible to those who have not the Faith. Paul Claudel, in his *Messe Là-bas*, gives voice to the agony of a soul about to receive communion, "when it realises that it has caused the image of the living God to participate in every moment, even in the most secret and traitorous moments, of its life."

And yet what a temptation it is for us, at certain times, not to involve God in the poor groping movements of the instinct! How we pity a youth blighted by the anguish of repeated failures, confessions, all that welter of shame! When someone "who has not got a sense of sin" attacks us on this point, how easily he disarms us!

But then he does not know that God reveals Himself only to the pure of heart (a thing which Rimbaud knew when he wrote "O purity! purity! In this moment of awakening I had a vision of purity! We go to God by the spirit! Harrowing misfortune!").

The adversary has never experienced that abrupt interruption of Grace caused by an image, a desire, that our heart has welcomed and caressed. He has never reckoned

up the crimes accumulated by those who play with human beings, for whom human beings are but toys.

However, it is probable that during the last seven years of her life, when Margaret lived apart from her confessor and better protected from the inquisitive crowd, she at last resigned herself to the thought of the sins she had so laboriously expiated. She stifled the memory of them and put her trust in Christ that He would love her as she was. Perhaps she even allowed herself to feel the pity which St. Francis of Assisi felt at last for his poor body, for his "brother ass." But was she capable of that great tenderness which Francis extended even to his tortured body? Did the day perhaps come when she disciplined herself only from habit, when her resemblance to her Lord had reached the point where nothing further needed to be added, when there remained nothing but to wait for death? A resemblance to the Son to the point of union with the Father. The Infinite Being completely filled this creature who by her merciless asceticism had stripped herself of everything that was not He. What was the point of pursuing the attack on a body which, through annihilation, had become divine? All was given to Margaret in one glance. "The great joy of that awakening," wrote St. John of the Cross, "is to know His creatures through God, and not God through His creatures."

Caryatides of Suffering

SO MARGARET, FUSED WITH CHRIST and through Him with the Father in the love of the Holy Ghost, shared in their solitude. For in that blessed thirteenth century Christ was as alone as He is to-day, as different from the world, as removed from its passions, as incomprehensible, as scandalous. That intimate group above Cortona—of a scourged and crucified man-God, and a woman who had joined Him by means of a martyrdom patiently endured for more than twenty years—has always awakened the same disapproval in nature.

Throughout the centuries of Faith, as in the centuries dedicated to science and rationalising, there has never been more than a handful of men and women prepared to "follow God into the deserts of divinity"—as the pseudo-Dionysius expresses it. No sooner had Francis of Assisi died than his disciples were quarreling about the bride he had bequeathed to them—the holy poverty which many of them had already repudiated. The proliferous germ, destined to be one of the causes of the Lutheran revolution, was already infesting and corrupting the mendicant Orders.

The visible Church which, in Margaret's century, was responsible for the teaching and spreading of the Gospel, was further removed then from the spirit of the Gospel than she is now. We dare not talk about the Popes of those days. And was the booted and quarrelsome Bishop of Arezzo more like Christ than the pious purple-sashed ad-

ministrators of to-day? Must we prefer the *condottieri* of the Sacred College of the centuries of Faith to the pious diplomats of contemporary history?

The struggles between the Spiritual and the Temporal for possession of the earth, and the rivalries which have always pitched the great religious Orders one against the other—all that creates an unchangeable background against which solitary figures stand out in relief—figures that we cannot fail to recognise because they all have the same gaze fixed on the Cross and they all keep the same silence. Popes, monks, priests or laymen, young boys, old men, enclosed or active nuns, students, Jocists, holy young girls—all have this characteristic in common: solitude with their God, agony, suffering, death with Him, but also peace, joy born of a very pure love, repose in the oblivion of all things, detachment from everything that is of the world.

If they belong to the Church they usually receive such treatment from the hierarchy as to make them resemble their Master even more. In the life of almost every saintly nun or religious we find the dungeon reserved for St. John of the Cross by his Superiors. We know the true story of the little Sister Teresa of Lisieux. This inflexible prioress, that archbishop who makes his old priests cry, have been given the mission of advancing those in their charge, if possible, to the transforming union.

The external aspects of the Church and all that her establishment in the world inevitably involves—her diplomacy, her immense organisation, the material assistance she receives from the ruling classes throughout the whole world—would serve her nothing if there did not exist, supporting her between earth and heaven, these caryatides of suffering, these men and women saints with lacerated shoulders who are united one with the other in an immense subterranean network of Grace.

They stand out for an invisible Church militant; they bear witness before History to the uninterrupted striving of humanity to surpass itself to the point of becoming divine—a striving which sets the lowliest and the most exalted destiny on the same road. The man kneeling beside the beggar-woman at the communion rail is called Blaise Pascal. The inhuman treatment which Margaret of Cortona inflicted on herself is the measure of a love immoderate even to madness; but it is the same love which burns with a very small flame in the souls of the rest of the faithful (it is already so beautiful to have a right to the name “faithful”!).

Of these there are hardly any who voluntarily seek out suffering. They are content to accept the part assigned to them, the trials of every day, “those task-masters which we receive at God’s hand”; from the daily dust of worries and vexations floating around what Teresa of the Child Jesus calls the “little way,” to the brutal blows that await us at every turning and multiply as we tend towards our decline: the diseased heart, the already corrupted flesh, the sly and secret ravages of the body—that thing which the doctor suddenly tells us, one day which is much like any other. The noises of the street come through the open window, a bird sings, and we are suddenly brought face to face with death unmasked. And even if that hour is spared us, we shall all come to that horror in the end, to that last desert of agony.

The Temptation of the Pathetic

WHAT IS IT, THEN, that holds and binds the simple Christian, who has no share in the joy of the saints, to the commandments of the Church? What is it that compels him to an "automatic reverence" for the rites of the Church? I am not speaking here of the routine herd glued to the doors at 12 o'clock Mass, waiting for it to be over: these people, whether they are moved by reflexes of childhood, social conventions, or a vague fear of hell, do not interest us.

I am thinking of other and noble people who, while far from being saints and having only a poor faith, persevere in a pedestrian religious life. The Adversary would suggest various low motives for this—the need for help, for protection, the fear of risk, the desire for compensation in another life—yet he might fail to see the motive which is usually the most important one for these half-holy people. It is the taste for dramatising a flat, gray existence, for enriching it by an interior life.

There is no creature so depraved but that Faith engages him in a solemn dialogue with the Eternal Being and whose slightest response does not re-echo across the spheres. All interior religion, however imperfect, adds infinite depth and height to each destiny. For the liturgy is life's orchestra, the Sacraments keep a fire kindled—sometimes a miserable flame, sometimes a brazier.

The fate of the soul is played out in every moment: its

eternity is contained in a second. A soul is at the mercy of a single covetous glance, a single consenting smile, and can at any moment be cast down headlong; man plays with heaven and hell a game in which the immortal part of his being is at stake.

In spite of all that is mechanical in religion, in spite of dry-as-dust sermons and bastard devotions, the lowliest Christian in a state of Grace knows that he is harbouring the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, knows that They make their dwelling within him. He has only to shut his eyes to feel the wind of Pentecost blowing within him and carrying away like thistledown his petty daily cares.

Every morning Mass bathes the dawning day in an air of grandeur, protects it against the immense vulgarity of things and people. I can think of a certain friend of mine to whom human poetry and human love have ceased to mean anything; he is unable to breathe or move outside that terrifying and tender Presence. Those who lose the Faith do so perhaps because they have never known how gentle is Our Lord. One cannot be cured of God once one has known Him. Those who reject Him have never possessed Him.

That is the secret of Christ's victory over certain people—although He is so incredibly exacting: "Be ye perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect." In their eyes nothing in the world is more delightful or attractive than that adventure, nothing so passionately interesting as a drama acted out in every moment of their lives, a drama which reaches its climax only with their final breath.

Very few among the best of men can endure life *as it is*. That is the real human motive for the Christian life—but it does not take the soul beyond the initial steps.

Christianity, as a source of exaltation, does in fact exhaust itself very quickly. And this explains those sudden separa-

tions from God, that boredom with and then revulsion from the liturgy, those repeated failures followed by stealthy returns to the confessional: what a wretched and shameful thing the Christian life is when it is not directed towards sanctity!

That sort of Christian life is, however, the lot of those who seek primarily in religion a seasoning to sharpen the taste of life. Nothing that is of the senses comes from God. We would give an infinite price for our corrupt nature to be able to tremble at the approach of the small Host. But sanctity begins where all those contentments of the flesh in a state of Grace end. Margaret of Cortona bears witness to this, with all her brothers and sisters who lose and then find themselves in the unimaginable union.

The sublime disorder of Margaret's holy life, and a love so unreasonable that we can hardly understand it, are not offered to us as an example to be followed. But, although the distance between her and us is so great, although she is so far ahead of us as she hurries along, we are all travelling by the same path. Nearly all of us will die before reaching or even approaching the cell where, during the last seven years, she listened to God's silence, which was more enriching than the words that had previously intoxicated her. None the less, the cell is there, awaiting us at the end of the unknown path; but because of our failures, because we have always to retrace our steps, and because we are satisfied with the intermittent sense of pathos to which our religious life returns, we shall never reach it.

Notwithstanding our incurable misery, we may compare Margaret's experience with the experience of other great mystics and reconstruct the stages of the journey we should have attempted ourselves if only we had been saints.

The Stages of the Journey to the Father

WE MAY TAKE AS A STARTING-POINT the revulsion which we sometimes feel under the impact of a set-back or a disappointment, that revulsion for all created things which, with the saints, is born of a nostalgic love of God. Our experience of human love helps us to understand the detachment from everything which is not the object of our predilection. Every man and woman has, at some time or other, felt life's flatness and staleness because a particular person is not present; we have all felt the world to be colourless because a beloved face is not there to see it.

From now onwards Margaret dispensed with formulas when talking to God, the unique object of her quest and of her love. Her prayer becomes an interior one; she can no longer tie down her thoughts by words; from now onwards sighs, sobs, ejaculations, and cries replace her conversations and her ordered prayers. Her sole desire is to be alone with her love. Nothing else has any value for her; there is no happiness apart from that repose, that calm, that burning quiet. We wonder if her directors realised what was at stake during that protracted and exhausting dispute as to whether Margaret should isolate herself in the cell at Sant-Egidio. Did they understand that to oppose her then was as cruel as to refuse a glass of water to someone dying of thirst?

At last, however, when she had gained her hard-won victory, we find her alone with her love. That burning quiet

. . . to achieve this she has had to renounce the enjoyment of God through the senses. The peace which surpasses all things is on a plane higher than the sphere in which love displays itself more doubtfully. All her inner powers are now caught up together; the infinitely idle soul is poised in a sort of motionless flight in the very presence of the Trinity. It is a state of happiness which cannot be described, but which we can sense when Margaret falls away from it once more, or rather when she imagines that she so falls.

We cannot conceive of the horror which abandonment by God—even His apparent abandonment—must hold for creatures who have known the peace *quae exsuperat omnem sensum*. Even when they try to persuade themselves, on their Director's authority, that God permeates them all the more when they think they have lost Him for ever, and even when they meditate upon the words of the *Imitation*: "When you think you are far from me, it is then that I am often the nearest," the soul grows faint as if left dangling between two worlds and abandoned by the hand which hitherto has supported it. It is not possible to retrace one's steps at this point in the ascent, for, according to St. John of the Cross, "God has transferred all that is good and strong from the senses to the spirit." That is to say, it is no longer possible for the soul to take root again in the world of sense: these springs have dried up for it and it can no longer take nourishment from earthly food. This is a season of drought and aridity, but also of an overwhelming supernatural light.

It is surprising that Margaret, after years of fierce penance, should still have hated herself to death on account of the wretched sins which she had already expiated a thousand times over. The reason is that at this last stage she sees her essential stain—a vision which is inflicted only on great mystics on the eve of the transforming union. The shame and revulsion that the saints feel for themselves is not forced

or self-induced. In the blaze of the Trinity to which they are drawing near they see themselves through and through—a self-knowledge of which no natural introspection is an equivalent—and it is a light which forgives nothing. It is a fire which scorches the desert over which Margaret, drunk with light, is making her way. Her courage would inevitably have failed her, if she had not realised that a return to the consolations of the past would have put a new distance between her and the Godhead, whose breath was burning her.

In order to reach Him she has to cross a final desert, the desert of aridity, of absolute emptiness. Everything has left her: beings and Being. And that is not all: everything as it were rises against her and God Himself treats her as an enemy. Hence, though Margaret is so obviously showered and loaded with graces, she experiences terror of being no longer loved, the fore-taste of hell, the madness of believing that she is outcast.

Did her senses never revolt? We do not know everything. Friar Giunta Bevegnati has not been able to resist the temptation of throwing a veil over what seems to him unedifying. But whatever the stirring of the carnal forces in Margaret may have been, the soul has mastered them and knows that, in proportion as she is exhausted and unable to collaborate, God works from within at her re-making.

Certain words seem to show that at this point there was a sort of duel in Margaret between habit—her taste for the interior voice—and this new power of contemplation which is developing in her almost without her knowledge. She always returns to Jesus Crucified, but she does so now in order to take a new leap: the spirit raises her to That which has no image. She comes to conceive of, adore, and hold dear a love that is without a face. These abrupt changes in height, these thundering ascents followed by descents and

downfalls—it is those things above all which wear out not only the body but the spirit of the saints.

However rigorous a penance may be, it touches only the flesh and can do nothing against the essential impurity of the mind. There is no asceticism that can alter the mind of man. It is Grace, therefore, which must wear away the very substance of the creature to whom Uncreated Love desires to be united. In the little cell above Cortona where, at Christ's command, an altar has been erected, a hand that is not human completes Margaret's preparation. According to St. Teresa, ecstasy itself becomes painful at this stage. God, if one may put it in this way, bestows His absence. The soul makes its way in the sky, but the sky is empty: it is not nothingness, but an absence, an infinite flight, a vanishing infinity.

We are now at the last lap of the unknown path where the Creator is going to flood into the broken creature like an incoming tide. The soul, emptied of all that is not God, is finally invested, invaded, occupied, possessed by Him. "I who was once darkness," murmurs Margaret dismayed, "I who was darker than the night!" Christ answers: "For love of you, new light, I bless the cell where you live lost in my love."

Sometimes, too, an angel spoke to her, and his words serve to corroborate that Margaret did indeed follow the road we have described. "You are," said the angel, "like a house which has been set on fire; it burns until it is utterly burnt out; in the same way you live in tribulation right up to the end. Although you possess peace, you are at war. Gold is purified in a furnace . . . Our Lord waits on the heart and from the first desire of love makes it expectant; and when this love desires ardently, He does not delay to come to the soul. Then love achieves in an instant that which is accomplished only with the passage of time in

THE STAGES OF THE JOURNEY TO THE FATHER

souls possessed of a less flaming charity. There are, in this love, three degrees by which the faithful and fervent soul attracts its Creator. When the soul believes itself destitute of all divine charity, nothing can console it but God. It is then that the Most High bends down and has compassion on the agonising creature . . . But before the universal Father of all comes to the soul created and redeemed by Him, love purifies the heart of all its illusions. The third degree of love is a desire which inflames the spirit as it were by fire. In this state the soul never ceases to seek everywhere and in everything its beloved, its bridegroom . . .”

Thus the angel helped Margaret to take stock of the path she had trodden and himself traced out the stages of her ascent to the Father.

Death, the Last Ecstasy

AT LAST WE COME to the month of February in the year 1297, when Margaret entered into her rest. The day and even the hour, which was that of dawn, were known to her in advance. She waited, with paralysed limbs, her soul having at times already left her body. Friar Giunta Bevegnati had been restored to her, or rather she had been restored to the good Friar. Without help from anyone, the superhuman adventure was consummated. The union was fulfilled in the very depths of being, where the Director had no access. There was no one in the world except her and her Creator. She had no needs other than a consecrated hand to bring her the Host and to absolve her.

From the 6th of February until the dawn of the 22nd when she passed into eternity she took no food whatever. That is all we know of her death. Hagiographers try in vain to orchestrate this meagre theme: a woman, fifty years old, burnt up by twenty-five years of fierce penance, dies in the corner of her cell.

There hung around the small bed the perfume which those who are present at the death of saints always believe they sense. This is the only detail which Friar Bevegnati records. He relates, too, that at the same hour a contemplative at Città di Castello saw Margaret entering heaven amidst a tumult of souls whom she had set free, and she testified that the woman of Cortona was Christ's new Magdalen. Did Margaret say at that moment, as we are told in her

various biographies, "The way of salvation is easy, it is sufficient to love"? Did she ask Friar Giunta to read to her from holy writings? Were her old friends around her, and particularly the Moscari? Her biographers say so; but there is no proof of this since Friar Giunta has nothing to say on the subject.

Nor does he tell us whether her unhappy child was at his mother's bedside. It is not a happy fate, at least in this world, to be the son of a saint unless one has become a saint oneself. One can picture the man, a monk and born from the sin of that ecstatic: we can imagine the fits of rebellion of which he was ashamed, his irritable reverence for the gently inflexible creature of whom he was born. Perhaps he pushed aside the sacrilegious thought: "*She* has had her period of happiness on earth, a full and flaming youth, whereas I . . ." But perhaps too she had inspired in him a desire to follow her along the unknown road, and perhaps he, a fervent religious, envied his mother for having reached the end of the exhausting earthly journey.

The death of a saint already lost in God is merely the confirmation of an established fact. The poor body which she had trailed with her along the unknown road was free at last. How had it held out so long? She now abandoned it to the civic and religious officials, to the Franciscans and to the crowd. This discarded covering which she had so loathed was now perfumed and surrounded with aromatic herbs. The iron coffin was sealed into the wall of the oratory at Sant-Egidio which Margaret had restored. It goes without saying that immediately afterwards miracles occurred everywhere. But the greatest of them all is still the miracle of her sanctity: the miracle which Love accomplished in a lost girl.

A girl who had been lost. We must always come back to that when we feel uneasy or repelled by the torture she in-

flicted on herself. The rigorous penances of Clare of Assisi, who preceded Margaret into glory (for she died in 1253 when Margaret was still a little girl), never assumed that character of hatred, that sort of vengeance which Margaret's soul sought to vent on her body. But then Clare had passed from a pure childhood to holy poverty and contemplation. Her passion for total abnegation, inherited from her father Francis, was the fruit of the love which she dedicated to the Child of the crib. But she put her daughters on guard against the excesses which were later to intoxicate Margaret. "Our body is not made of iron," St. Clare wrote to her much-loved Agnes of Bohemia, "and our strength is not that of a rock. Live and hope in the Lord and may your service be according to right reason; temper your sacrifice with the salt of prudence."

If Margaret had been the recipient of this advice, she might have answered Clare in some such way as this: "You do not know the memory the body keeps of sins a thousand times expiated, you do not know the germs that pullulate in a body that has consented to sinful love; you do not know, you who have given back to God your child's heart just as you received it."

There is no doubt that on that dawn of the 22nd of February, 1297, she had transcended, left behind, that folly of expiation. We do not know what Margaret said to herself when she stood on the brink of eternity. The murmured words have not come down to us, like those of the dying St. Clare which we can hear still—those sublime and tender words with which the poor Lady of Assisi soothed her soul: "Go in deep peace, for you have a good guide to show you the way; go fearlessly, for He who created you, has sanctified you and loves you with a gentle love as a mother loves her only son. Be blessed, O my God who made me, be blessed eternally." Let us believe that the same

certainty and the same trust upheld the penitent woman of Cortona in her agony. "Do you see," Clare of Assisi asked of a Sister a little before she died, "do you see, O my sweet daughter, the King of Glory as I see Him?"

Margaret too saw the King of Glory. And the King of Glory looked at her with that look which only contemplative souls have had bestowed upon them, a look forbidden to us simple Christians by that harsh law which Tauler interpreted: "To aspire to the double enjoyment of God and His creatures is utterly impossible, even if you weep tears of blood over it."

The thing that marks us out, us ordinary Christians, is that we have a daily irrefutable experience of the truth of Tauler's maxim. We know that the Beloved is waiting for us on the other side of things, the other side of people. But we have not the strength to cross the living barrier. Let us learn, then, not to fear death, but even to hold it dear, for death, in separating us from things and people, shows us God and surrenders us to Him.

Nothing is more comforting than St. Teresa's remark: "There is a great resemblance between ecstasy and death." Death—the only ecstasy that we poor Christians will ever know.

For Margaret, the death-agony was a drawn-out ecstasy, and the death an ecstasy fulfilled. For years her flesh and blood had had no part in her union with God; she had reached Him less and less through the senses. But now her soul, already half-submerged, was wholly offered to the incoming sea which was to roll over her, once the barrier of her body was broken down.

But even though she had passed beyond God in His humanity, the Son of Man whom she had accompanied in His Passion through so many years of penance was surely present, all the same, to help her on her way; and she saw

for the last time on earth that Face, no longer covered with spittle, but triumphant, radiant, as it had appeared to the first martyr, Stephen. "Behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of the Father."

Margaret of Cortona would have been a different saint, though just as closely united with God, if the glorious Christ, King over the world and death, had dominated her life instead of the sacrificed Lamb and the Man of Sorrows.

In truth it was perhaps neither the King of Glory nor the Victim crowned with thorns who received her last look. As death drew near, when her almost disembodied soul was drifting on the very confines of eternity, perhaps she saw Our Lord as He Himself was when He wandered on the borderline of heaven and earth, as He was on the road to Emmaus, as Rembrandt painted Him—"pale, thin with lips darkened where His agony had left its traces . . ." But what do we know of the death of saints? For all we know there is one who, at the last moment, has uttered the same unbelievable cry as the dying Son: "My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?" Perhaps Margaret blanched before this last ordeal and shut her eyes so as to blot out the infinite void.

Temptations in front of a Dead Body

AND NOW I AM GOING TO LISTEN to what the Enemy has got to say, for he is suffering at the sight of me kneeling in front of my dead heroine. "The perfume coming from that body means nothing to us," he says, "nor the miracles. Now is the moment when the lips should suddenly open and speak. But the dead body of a saint keeps the secret of all dead bodies. It becomes part of the great communal silence. Can we expect any more from mortal remains come down from a Cross than from a body eaten away by debauchery? Both are motionless, both are dumb for ever. It has been written of living mystics that they are explorers of an invisible world, and the witnesses to it. But to believe what they say on their return we must first be sure that they ever got there. And of course they say that they have seen, touched, and possessed the Love that is without an image. And admittedly they have been transfixed in ecstasy before the crowd. They have been held, trembling, by an unseen hand. But it is precisely that hand which we ought to see. Otherwise we shall never know whether they were not the victims and dupes of their own heart, which tore and split itself to reach the cruel and delicious duality of ecstasy."

So speaks the Enemy. And it is true that the death of saints brings us up against the same insurmountable barrier as all other deaths. We bang our heads against the same

stone wall. And bodies kept intact and mummified like those of St. Clare of Assisi and St. Charles Borromeo only offer us a lesson about nothingness. And yet each generation, like that which saw the Son of Man live and die, clamours for a sign. Mystics retain their hold upon us because we expect them to enable us to touch the substance of what we hope in. And then they die, leaving nothing but words prudently edited by their confessors.

But come now!—the greatest of them have told us that God wills that we should believe in Him blindly and in darkness. "Blessed are those who have not seen and who have believed!" We must not expect the saints to give us a proof that would dispense us from the necessity of believing. They teach us, on the contrary, to believe without consolation and without proof—to surrender everything in advance as barter for unseen treasure, for a pearl without price lying at the bottom of an ocean from which no diver has ever returned.

The legend of their lives, the flaming dialogues of a Margaret of Cortona, an Angela of Foligno or a Catherine of Siena, the Canticle of St. John of the Cross in which we delight—all these things prevent us, poor travellers on the earth, from being frightened of the dark, they help us to march forward into the night without losing heart. I open my missal at the page for Holy Saturday where there is the Litany of the Saints, and, from the depths of my darkness, I call to you one by one by your names; I conjure up your innumerable army, silent but eternally alive, confessors, virgins, penitents, apostles, martyrs—jubilant procession of the Lamb.

An Examination of Conscience

I AM ASHAMED OF HAVING so repeatedly, in the course of this book, begged my reader's indulgence for Saint Margaret's excesses. In this hideous world of 1943 when humanity is inflicting such immeasurable tortures on itself it would be strange indeed if a reader of this book dared to cry scandal.

For our world hates itself infinitely more than Margaret ever hated herself. The Will to Power commits it to a tearing out of its own entrails, not in an excess of mad fury but lingeringly, year by year; and all the genius of inventors, the heroism of young men, the endurance of the universal poor, is not enough to bring this immense collective agony to an end. But with Margaret it is love which pitches her against herself. We can refuse to go into the reasons for this love, but we must not be surprised when a lover places her footsteps in those of her beloved and imitates him narrowly.

Perhaps it is a mistake to think that suffering must be the wages of crime. Nevertheless, this is what man has thought ever since there have been men, and it has been thought even by those who do not believe in God. We commonly say of a condemned person that he has "paid his debt." Margaret was not unreasonable, then, in thinking that she too had contracted a debt during her pleasurable and criminal youth, and in forcing herself to pay it to the last farthing.

Her faith went further, it is true. She believed implicitly in the redemptive power of penance and that each of us, if we so wish, can co-operate in Christ's Passion. If, with the whole Catholic Church, she was mistaken on this point, the torture she inflicted on herself would have been an error, but an error of love, and a witness to love.

Let the man of 1943, whose fate it is to hate and to be hated, to destroy and be destroyed, think twice before he jeers and shrugs his shoulders; let him try to understand the secret of this holy madness. At bottom, nothing that is done through love is horrible. One must not pity those who love for the ill they do themselves. In this ghastly universe where the Will to Power pits mechanised man against himself, and where *God is dead*—if we are to believe Zarathustra—what is there left for the murderous and murdered creature of here-below to love? Nothing, except what the philosopher of this *Will to Power* offers him as his final consolation: *amor fati*. According to Nietzsche, all that remains for man to love is his appalling destiny.

What marvellous madness of Margaret to reverse the idol, to shatter the iron collar of destiny! Yes, indeed, for behold her free to shave her head, to deprive herself of food, to smear her face, to seem to abandon her little boy—beyond all reason! The Cross is a folly, truth is mad. I should never have really understood or fully appreciated this stupefying statement of St. Paul unless I were living at this point in history, and during this space of time when we are condemned to suffer.

For two thousand years, from Socrates to Hegel and Marx, the wisest men have sought a formula for reasonable living, for ordering the relationships of humanity—individual, national, or social relationships—according to Reason. They have sought, and imagine they have found. They have discovered the laws of History which determine

the estate of man. They know what they must do to assure the final victory of Reason and the domination of man over things. Others hark back to ancient disciplines and try to re-establish in society the hierarchies of which they think man has need. What methodology! And what a technology to match it!

Each important nation in turn has striven to impose its wisdom on the rest of the world—for the world's good. Fortified with fire and steel, it has first forced conviction on its own citizens and then crossed frontiers and gone as far as its strength could reach. Chemists and physicists, masters of matter, have put their findings at the disposal of opposing ideologies. A ten-ton bomb has the same persuasive power, whatever the national colours of the aeroplane that drops it.

This world, governed by Reason, is also a world governed by morality—morality being an affair of the reason. The world would obviously say of Margaret that she would have done better to work hard and bring up her little boy; as she was pretty, she would certainly have found an honest man to marry her, and she would then have given more children to the fatherland.

The strange thing is that one of the missions of the religion professed by our penitent, one of the missions of Holy Church herself, is to make truth reasonable. She has succeeded miraculously in this, and won the praises of balanced men and the admiration of political philosophers. Theologians find satisfactory answers to all questions. What was the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? How can we reconcile the freedom of God with the freedom of man? In what does original sin consist? How should we resolve the problem of evil? Why does the sin of the first couple weigh on the whole human race? Why has not the Incarnation of the Son of God shut the gates of hell for ever? How does Christ give His body to be eaten and His blood

to be drunk? It is perfectly possible for logicians to make all these things acceptable to an enlightened person. There is no lack of Christians, even among the best, who are converted by St. Thomas Aquinas, and who, helped by Grace, find faith at the end of a syllogism.

But when all is said and done, we always have to come back to the little book full of words which are absurd if we judge them by human reason, and stories which are at the same time adorable and repellent. Is it prudent not to think about food and clothes? Is improvidence a virtue? Why is the prodigal better treated than his elder brother who was always faithful? Why are not the workers who endured the weight and heat of the whole day paid more than the lazy and canny ones who came to the yard at the end of the day when it was cool? Why is idle Mary preferred to Martha? Is it good to bring not peace but a sword? To come to separate husband and wife, brother and brother? All commentaries try in vain to soften the sense of a lesson so scandalously lucid. It is obvious that God's justice mocks our justice—that the laws of the Kingdom of God mock those of the sons of Adam—of that Adam who picked from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil the fruit whose poison burns us still.

But all of us, whether we are believers or not, feel that the whole power and enchantment of the Gospel derive from the scandal which it excites: our enchantment increases as our reason protests. What if truth has nothing to do with Reason and human logic? What if it really is the madness, the *absurdity*, which St. Paul, and afterwards Tertullian proclaimed? Perhaps it always wanders veiled among men, as Pascal said, and has to be ravished by some means unknown to Descartes and all the thinkers that have come after him? Supposing, in this universe governed by the laws of Reason and still subject to the truth of Aristotle,

that the saints who pass for mad are really wise? Supposing the true Church were recognisable less by her doctrine—sublime though it is and satisfying to the intellect—than by the fruits she bears and because she is the Church of the saints?

For philosophers, only logical, immaterial, and eternal truths are real. But for each of us what is real is the I, it is the concrete human state—the very thing that our wise stoical masters took no account of. They did not care about our individual life so long as we knew how to hold it in check, how to remain in all circumstances faithful to the laws of Reason and the principles of rational logic.

However, they cannot help the fact that we have shown less docility ever since Someone came into the world and pronounced certain words which were illogical and strictly absurd. A restlessness has been born, a desire to seek by other methods than those of the masters a truth different from theirs—a truth which concerns our personal life, our conscience, our most secret drama.

Such is the law of our nature. For all her excesses, it was her own nature that Margaret of Cortona obeyed, pursuing, out of her love for it, a truth more abstract but, for her, Incarnate. Margaret behaved as if there was only herself and her God in the world. But when she, or any other great mystic, speaks of that madness, millions of us know what she is talking about.

There is really no choice for us between the God of the philosophers and wise men, the Author of geometrical truths, and the God who possesses us from within (for He has set up His dwelling in our souls) and from without (for the Word was made flesh, as those have testified who saw It with their eyes and touched It with their hands). What we must know is whether the abstract God, Descartes' Prime Mover, is more in conformity with Healthy Reason than the

God who loves His creatures, who vouchsafes or withholds His Grace; for we have believed in one thing only, but a thing which satisfies our soul's demands and our heart's joy—we have believed that God is love. We have taken at their word "some obscure Jews," the disciples of a crucified man, and among them John: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the word of life . . . declare we unto you that you also may have fellowship with us . . . We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren . . . Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren . . . My little children, let us not love in word, but in deed and in truth . . . If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart . . ."

We have believed in this madness: the insertion of eternity into time, of God into ephemeral man. We have believed the unbelievable: that the Infinite Being was engulfed in our miserable human history.

And certainly if Margaret of Cortona believed in this love to the extent of sacrificing her life to it day after day it was because she had received a sign, because she had heard, before all her inner messages, a voice perhaps less distinct but equally imperious. She had heard it as she stood beside the dead body of her lover, and a little later as she sat under the fig-tree in her father's garden. Nor can the intermittent faith of the least of us be explained in terms of reasoning or of a decision he may have come to after ripe reflection. No, it is there because someone has touched his heart, because there is a source of tears in him which has gushed forth once and will never run dry again. "It is not you who chose me, it is I who chose you," said the Lord. That is the mystery of Grace in its unfathomable simplicity.

AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

Shortly before Margaret came into the world, Pope Gregory IX, fulminating against the Emperor Frederick II, accused him of holding that "one must only believe absolutely that which is proved by the nature of things and by natural Reason." If the humble Margaret had been told about this and if she had understood what it was all about, she would have said that she put her trust in natural reason for all that concerned physical things, in the field not only of science and philosophy but of theology also. All she would have insisted on is the right to believe that there exists an order of charity, of which Pascal tells us in a famous fragment that it is infinitely loftier than that of bodies or minds and has its own special ways of investigation and knowledge, its own touchstones, its own reasons of the heart of which the head knows nothing.

We cannot deny that on the plane of Reason and from the point of view of Kantian morality Margaret of Cortona is indefensible. And it is true, also, that the Church, by her theology, appeals to human Reason and succeeds in satisfying it. This does not alter the fact that in raising a Margaret of Cortona or a Benoît Labre to the altars, she throws a challenge to this Reason itself.

In spite of her Greek tradition and all that she has borrowed from Aristotle, the Church is of God and that is why she cannot help defying the reason of men. The Church is stronger than herself, if we may dare to say so. The Church of scholasticism kneels before the sublime madmen of the Cross, and it is by that sign that we know her to be the true Church, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church of the Virgin, the Church of the Saints.

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